

**Robert Louis Wurster
Veteran**

**Mike Russert and Wayne Clarke
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

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New York State Military Museum
Saratoga Springs, NY**

Interviewer: This is an interview at the New York State Military Museum, Saratoga Springs, New York. It is the first of February 2005, approximately 1:30 p.m. Interviewers are Wayne Clarks and Mike Russert. Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth, please?

Wurster: My name is Robert Louis Wurster. I was born November 1st, 1945, Oswego (?), New York.

I: Okay, what was your educational background prior to entering service?

RW: I had up to one year of college, I attended State University of Farmingdale for advertising art design, and that was from (19)65 through March of 1966.

I: Okay. Did you enlist, or were you drafted?

RW: I enlisted.

I: And you selected the U.S. Navy. Why did you enlist, why did you select the Navy?

RW: Well I probably enlisted, uh, my dad's an army veteran of world war two, and he always advised me if I ever have to go into service, go somewhere where you got three square meals a day, heat; not living in a foxhole or eating out of a helmet. So I took his advice, and that's one reason, and also, I didn't relish going in any army and probably winding up in Vietnam at the time, so I joined the Navy.

I: Okay, why did you enlist rather than wait to be—

RW: Well, I, actually, what happened was, I had completed that first year of college; I got out in March of (19)66. Within my first year I was in a trimester period, then I was to go back in June. Well in those days when you went to school you got a student classification, when you're out of college, even for the summer, you lost it. And I lost my student classification, but I didn't worry too much about it, getting drafted, because, you know, the Vietnam war was going on pretty good then. And I thought being that I was on the Dean's list at school, it would keep me on, but apparently, I guess, it didn't, because I wasn't taking anything really important enough for the country's needs, being an advertising art design. So, while I was on vacation, I started getting letters from the Selective Service Board telling me, you know, I- Basically, you're going to be getting drafted. You won't be able to get back to school. And this dragged out for about a year, before I finally got a notice- And then I had, I think it was, I had so much time to go and

enlist in the branch of my choice. So I wound going in- I tried the coast guard, they didn't take me because I wore glasses. I tried the Navy Reserve, they didn't want me. Air Force didn't want me, so, the Navy took me.

I: Okay. Where did you go for your basic training?

RW: Great Lakes, Illinois, Naval Training Center.

I: How long were you there?

RW: I went July of (19)67 through October of (19)67.

I: Okay. What was your basic training like?

RW: Well for one thing, it was in the summer time, so it was really hot, humid. It was, you know, you were on the go all the time, you never really got a chance to do much for yourself; either drilling or going to classes, learning, you know, Naval orientation and all kinds of Navy... Things you might need. Um. It was rigorous, and I couldn't wait to get out.

I: Okay. Where did you go from Great Lakes?

RW: I was sent to Newport Island, Class A Signalman School, visual communications, to become a signalman. And I was there until... I got out in December. I was there from all October through December of (19)67.

I: Okay, and what were the things that you learned there- In the signal school?

RW: Well, we learned how to read and send flashing light, semaphore excuse me, semaphore, which is, you know, sending messages with two flags. Learned how to- Morse code was a big thing, that we had to learn Morse code by light; send it, receive it. We just spent hours on end in these Quonset huts, watching guys send flashing lights, recording it, and, you know, it was... Was pretty... straightforward.

I: Okay, where did you go from Newport?

RW: I was sent for active duty on the USS Beatty, DD 756, a destroyer down in Norfolk, Virginia. I know- I was on that for a while. When I got out of signalman school, they- When you go in, you- I was, what you call an SA seaman apprentice. When I got out of signalman school I became a designate, what they call a designate striker. I was SMSA: signal man senior apprentice, and I was in that rate until I took their correspondence courses, and became seaman. And then I was an SMSN for a while.

I: Okay, and your duties assigned in the Navy were as a signalman?

RW: Yeah, I wasn't what- Well, being that was... It wasn't a real active ship, it was like, tied up most of the time. What they were doing was there were- It was becoming active and becoming a reserve destroyer, which we did, and we were sent to Tampa, Florida, and for the second part of my duty on the Beatty, I was stationed in Tampa. And we were there- Just there for the reserve- Local reserves that came once a week, and they took the ship over, and didn't do too much. I didn't really get that much experience, I wasn't sea gulling at the time.

I: Okay, were you still using any of the skills that you had learned up in school?

RW: Oh yeah. They kept me practicing. We- Certain hours of the day, we practiced with the flashing light, you know, and they- But it wasn't much because they- They just weren't doing anything; we were just tied up there, and we were like a skeleton crew... We were like care-takers of the vessel for the reserves that came on board, and they- They took over... One weekend a month they went out to sea for overnight. And I- I didn't- I just was like, a...

I: Did you go out to sea with them?

RW: Yeah, I went out to sea- I didn't do anything, because they- I was regular Navy and they believed it was practice, you know, for the overnight... And over.

I: Okay, so, basically, you were at- Just a- To keep as a skeleton crew for the reserves-

RW: Basically, yeah, at that point-

I: Were you on it when it was turned over to the Venezuelan Navy, or... ?

RW: No... Well- Eventually, I was on until... The spring of 1969, and they decided to really get of a lot of the personnel, so then I was sat- I was sent to the USS Little Rock, CLG4, over the Mediterranean. And I went from one extreme to the other, from very inactive, to, you know, really learning the rate. And that was the flagship of the Mediterranean fleet. I was on Admiral staff, and then I really got into that- You know, learning how to be a signalman throughout operations with the NATO fleet... Then it really got hot- As far as my, you know, ability to become a signalman.

I: Do you mind telling us about some of your experiences while you were on the Little Rock?

RW: Well, being that we were a flagship, the Admiral that we would go out with on occasions, and have operations with the rest of us with elements of the 6th fleet, including the carrier, JF Kennedy... Being that we were a flagship, we really didn't participate that much- We were like- We always sailed behind the carrier and, you know, did some operations, but we were always able to break off, and do independent steaming, going to some port where the Admiral had to- Put a party on or reception for some local dignitary. With the Monaco - Monte Carlo several times, and they had- We had Prince Rainier and Princess Grace on board, one time, I got to see her, which was pretty... Well, it was a really good experience, and Monaco is a beautiful country. We were in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia once, and I had a reception- I don't know- I'll guess it was Tito, maybe that was in power or... He always had- We always went out- We had to do a lot of these receptions and go with these really nice ports and... Entertain the local politicians, or... Dignitaries. So, we did a lot of that, we were like the ceremonial ship. It was nice duty, but—

I: Did you have to spit polish it?

RW: Oh yeah, you had to be pretty well squared away, uniform, and... You had to know your- Your rating and big- How to be a good signalman, and that kind of thing. You couldn't get off the ship unless you were, you know... You looked good. And your conduct ashore also was important.

I: Okay. You mentioned you had one kind of humorous incident when the Little Rock collided with another ship?

RW: We were- Hah, we were on operations... I was one of the signalman on duty, and we were operating with elements of the fleet- Of the NATO fleet. We had the Greeks and the Italian Navy with us, and the Netherlands, and the English. And it was about four thirty in the morning and we were- It was just getting... Daylight, and we had a Greek destroyer off our port beam, and another vessel off the starboard side, there. And... I was on watch, (they were) having me on watch that morning, and- I don't know what the reason was, but the Greek destroyer turns starboard, and it- Well- Went right across our, you know, our bow, and we hit at the midships. And shortly after that, you know... The main hatch opening up to the signal ridge and here's- In front of me is the whole command- The Admiral commanding officer of the fleets standing in his boxer shorts, and wondering "What the heck happened!?", you know. He was only there for about two minutes and then he dashed out of the hatch again. That's my only experience coming face to face with the Admiral. But if they had- Every- We stopped dead and they had one of our- Some officers went over and- There was an investigation- I don't really know what happened, to this day, but we pulled into Valletta, Malta, and we had some minor repairs done. That's about all I... Heard about it, after that.

I: Now you mentioned also that you got to see Bob Hope?

RW: Yup- Well, we- The Bob Hope USO show came over, and the carrier USS Saratoga- Well, first of all, we were home-porting at IATA (?) Italy, and- Which is a small, little fishing village between Naples and Rome on the coast there, and the USS Saratoga pulled in and they put the... Bob Hope was there with his USO show, and he put it on- Put it on, just for us, for the Admiral, and the USS Little Rock. Was quite... Quite a show.

I: Was this on the deck of the...?

RW: It was on the- Not the main, it was one deck down, what do they call it, the flight deck? No, the...

I: The hangar deck?

RW: The hangar deck or the USS Saratoga. He had Connie Stevens and the Gold Diggers from the Dean Martin Show. Was quite a... Quite a time. Yeah.

I: Did you have women aboard your ship, or was it strictly male?

RW: It was strictly male at that time, yeah, it was... No women.

I: You said you got to visit many ports that you probably would have never have gotten to visit. Could you...?

RW: Oh sure. We were in Lisbon a couple of times. Barcelona. Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. Rhodes, Greece. Athens. Valletta, Malta. Oh jeez, there's more, I... Gibraltar, been to Gibraltar several times. Morocco... There's probably others, I can't- We had all the... It was great duty- Being the Admiral was there and, you know, he was the commanding officer of the fleet, and he could go just about anywhere he wanted to, and had great tours- The chaplains office onboard provided the tours, and for, like, a couple of bucks you'd be going all day- They'd get a bus and eat at a nice restaurant and really had- If

you brought your camera- I got a lot of good shots, a lot of good slides of various cities that I was in, it was very good.

I: Now, how were you accepted as an American in the military at that time in the Mediterranean?

RW: Very good! The Italians-

I: Did you wear civilian clothes or did you...?

RW: Excuse me. No- Well, most of the time we were in uniform, and... Towards the end of my tour, I guess, when Admiral Zumwalt became the chief naval officer to Navy, with a Z-grams, we weren't allowed to have civilian clothes on board up until that point, then Admiral staff, which is the signalmen, and the radiomen... Us, we were able to, you know, store them on board. We didn't- I don't remember using them that much though, we usually had to be in full uniform. And Italy was great, the people were very friendly and warm. I... Everybody- Every place we went was very nice, and I had no problems- They used to tell us if saw any kind of a communist thing going on in the square, or you know, in town, we would stay clear of that kind of element. But it was a ... A very- Very good experience.

I: Okay. So you were discharged?

RW: Yeah, we were- We were relieved by our sister ship, the USS Springfield, which was also- It was a- It was exactly the same type of class of cruiser as we were. They relieved us in August of 1970, and we were done as the flagship. A lot of guys were transferred off to the ship and the Admiral, of course, transferred his flag to the Springfield- We came home. We came back to- We stood- We went to Newport Island first, for a very short period of time, and then we went up to Boston Navy Yard; went and dry dock, and then everything was- We were over- Pretty much done with sea duty and I got out in April (19)71. I was... Separated.

I: Okay. After you left the service, did you join any veteran's organizations, or any... Organizations at all?

RW: No. I thought about it but I never really- I was going to join Vietnam Veterans of America... And- I don't know, I just got lazy- I never really... Didn't get involved in anything like that.

I: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that was in service with you?

RW: I tried to, like- I wrote some letters to a couple of friends of mine, but... I didn't get any response, and we- Kind of like, that was it. Then the Little Rock- When the Little Rock was decommissioned, in the middle of the (19)70s- And I never thought this would happen, and it became, what you might say, a museum piece. Right now, it's up in Buffalo, it's in a servicemen park, with a submarine, and the USS Sullivan's destroyer. And I was just up there this April- It's great. They did a nice job restoring it and I just never thought that my ship would be in a museum some day! And I also belong to the Association, the USS Little Rock associated- I belong to them- Belonged to them for several years. And I'm really interested- If they- If it were closer by, I think I would

volunteer and, you know, be down with the ship, a lot, helping out, but, you know, it's just too far.

I: How do you think your time in the service had an effect or- Changed anything in your life?

RW: It made me more mature. It grew me up. You know, it was good discipline. I think every young male should probably serve at least a couple of years in the military.

I: Okay, let's take a look at some the photographs you-

Interviewer 2: Did you make use of the GI Bill when you got out?

RW: Yes, I did. When I got out of service, I wanted to take up architectural drafting, and I got a job done in Schenectady, with Link and Cullen Architects, they took me on as an apprentice under the stay in New York pressure program, I was able to... At the time I was there I collected on GI Bill for a couple of years. So I- I did a little- I got a little bit out of it. Not that much, but it was good. (Wurster gets handed a picture) This is just a picture- This is the official picture taken in- On uh, when I was at the Great Lakes. (Handed another, larger picture) This is another one- Another Shot of recruit training. (Handed another photo) Oh, this was taken a couple of years ago. This is up in Buffalo, on Little Rock. I was standing on the signal bridge, and they were- It wasn't quite as restored as well as it is now. That's all there is to that. (Handed another photo) This is the photo of the ship, up in Buffalo. (Handed two more photos) These are two more (of the ship).

I: And I think you gave us these, if you want to just tell us about them. (Hands W some memorabilia)

RW: This is a shoulder patch we wore this on the- On the seam of the right shoulder here. It was this, Little Rock. And I had another one when I was Admiral staff, SATCOM 6 fleet, which was the one I wore most of the time. And this is just the rate for signalman seaman. That's an E3 rating. And then I got promoted to petty officer 3rd class, second man rank.

I2: So is that like and E4?

RW: This is E4, correct.

I: Then you have some other things in here?

RW: Oh, this is just a little album I've kept over the years of some documents and pictures of my military service. Here's some- I don't know if you can see this- Some pictures- I was over with some of the crew, and we were in Monaco at the time. When I was in Great Lakes in the Navy boot camp training, I was fifth squad leader, which was recruit petty officer. I was in charge of my squad, so to speak, and I got this little certificate when we graduated from boot camp.

I2: Now, did you get an extra stripe when you graduated?

RW: Yes, this is the one- This is what we wore. It's a small version of a petty officers' insignia, which they have in the regular Navy. (Flips through the book) Okay. This was a big day when I- On the left here, this is the day I left the United States and went

overseas. Very sad day, my parents were really upset. I was kind of- When I was in the Great Lakes, I was kind of the old man of the company; most of the guys were 18, 19 years old. I was 20, 21 years old. So, I was kind of the old guy of the outfit for boot camp training. Just- What happened was I graduated from Lynn High in (19)63, and for the first couple of years, you know, my parents didn't have any money for college, so I just took some jobs until I went to Farmingdale in (19)65, and, so, I was a little older when I listed, than most guys were at the time. When I was in Guyana(?), we were able to have an apartment ashore, and these are just some shots. (shows pictures) Well, some of these are in Rome, and these are of our apartment in IATA(?). I don't know if this is able to be viewed- This is just a shot of documents stating that I became a petty officer when I was on Little Rock, over in the Mediterranean, that's what I ratioed, just some third-class insignias. These are the two shoulder patches that we had to wear. (Flips through the book more) Well, I say- Everything else in here is just copies of my discharge and separation papers. I also have my dad- Like I said, was an army veteran of world war two. This was some of his documents. He was with the 98th division, 389th infantry. (Closes the book) And... I guess that's about it.

I2: Alright, well, thank you very much for your interview.

RW: Sure.