

Transcript

Oral History Interview

Maurice Barksdale

**USS *Razorback* Crewman
1961 – 1963**

I – Maurice, you were a Cook aboard USS *Razorback*?

MB – That's correct. I was a Cook from 1960 until March of 1963. I finished Sub School in December of 1960 and was assigned to *Razorback*.

I – So this was when she still had her "Step Sail" originally.

MB – She still had her "Step Sail".

I – And then she went into the shipyard and received the "North Atlantic" sail.

MB – That's correct. I think we went into the shipyard in maybe, the spring of 1962. We stayed there four or five months, which was good duty by the way, and they put the new sail on.

I – Was *Razorback* your first submarine?

MB – Yes, *Razorback* was my first submarine.

It was an interesting situation how I got on submarines. I joined the Navy in 1958 as a High School Airman Apprentice. I wanted to be a Navy Aviation Ordnanceman. So when I got out of Boot Camp in June of 1958, I was assigned to the Ordnance school in a little place called Norman, OK.

I took my preliminary training, for four months, in Norman to be an Ordnanceman. Then I was assigned to a squadron in Kingsville, TX. Believe it or not, I'm from Texas. I joined the Navy to see the world, and I wound up in Kingsville, TX, of all places. I was very unhappy about that, but Kingsville turned out to be a nice duty assignment.

I was assigned to what is called a "Reciprocal" Squadron, which is a squadron that has propeller-driven aircraft, and I served in the Aviation Ordnance Division for almost seven or eight months. I was the lowest ranking enlisted man in the shop, so I had to go to mess cooking. I'm sure you know what mess cooking is.

I – Right.¹

MB – So I had to spend sixty days in the galley. So I spent my sixty days in the galley.

I – Because it was traditional at that time, when you arrived at your first duty station as a brand new enlistee, that you did sixty days in the galley. By then, there would be another new person to take your place.

MB – That is absolutely correct. You were basically the low person on the totem pole.

MB – So I spent my sixty days in the galley, and I was re-assigned to the squadron. When I returned to squadron, there were three other Airmen Second Classes, Airmen Deuces as they called them then, in my shop. So, about a week after I returned, my Chief Petty Officer announced at a division meeting that two of us had to go back to the galley for mess cooking. So I said, “Wait a minute Chief, I just got back from mess cooking. These other two guys just got here. I don’t think I should have to go.”

He said, “I don’t care what you think, I’m the Chief, and we’re going to do what I think.”

And I said, “Yes, Chief”. That’s the difference between being an E-2 and an E-7.

So the Chief wrote our three names on slips of paper and put them in his hat, his Chief’s hat. I’m not kidding you. He put these names in his hat and shook that hat, and the first name he pulled out of that hat said “Barksdale”.

I said, “Jesus Christ, I’ve got to go back to mess cooking again.”

The second name he pulled out of that hat had my name on it too. He had put my name in that hat two or three times.

¹ “Mess Cooking” is duty in the galley helping the cooks – washing dishes, cleaning, carrying supplies for the cooks, and assisting with food preparation, but not actually cooking food.

I said, "Whoa, wait a minute." To make a long story short, I went back to mess cooking again for the second time in about a five month period. When I got back to the galley, I saw one of the cooks that I knew when I was there the first time.

He said, "Hey, what are you doing back here on mess cooking?"

I said, "Well, the squadron sent me back to mess cooking."

He said, "As long as you're going to be in galley, why don't you be a Cook?"

I said, "I didn't join the Navy to be a Cook. I joined the Navy to be on an Aircraft Carrier and be an Aviation Ordnanceman."

He said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'm going to put you on Cook's duty while you're here for these sixty days." And I never went back to the squadron. I changed my rate from High School Airman Apprentice to High School Seaman Apprentice and I struck for Commissaryman. You know what a striker is?

I – A "striker" basically means you are an apprentice to that particular job.

MB – That's absolutely correct.

I – You're no long a general seaman doing any job; you're working toward a specific job.

MB – The only work that I did from that point on was in the galley.

I – It's almost like you're interviewing for that job, and the senior men, the Cooks in this case, who were very experienced, kind of tested you and evaluated you, and if they said you were good enough to be a Cook.

MB – Then I was good enough to be a cook.

In addition to that, they trained me in the cooking process, which isn't as simple as most people think. It's not just a matter of breaking an egg and putting it on the stove and saying, "Hey, you want it over easy, or what?"

So, they started me off in the bake shop, which was a wonderful thing that I'll tell you about a little later in this interview.

I learned how to bake. It was interesting. When I say, "I learned how to bake", I mean bread, cakes, pies, doughnuts, rolls anything you can think of, I learned how to bake.

I transitioned then over to being a regular cook. I learned how to cook almost everything in the Navy.

I made Third Class. I was a Seaman², and I made Third Class Commissaryman³. So, one day, I was standing at quarters and the Chief said, "Any of you guys got enough guts to volunteer for submarine duty?" Nobody raised their hand.

My brother was in World War II and he told me, "Whatever you do when you go in the Navy, don't ever volunteer for ANYTHING." So, what did I do, I volunteered for submarine school. I didn't think anything about it, because I didn't think that I'd get to go to submarine school.

About a month and a half later, the Division Officer called me in and said, "Barksdale?"

I said, "Yes, sir?"

He said, "We just got your orders in."

I said, "Where am I going? Where am I going? Am I going to a destroyer or a cruiser or what?"

He said, "No, you're going to sub school."

I said, "I'm going to sub school?"

He said, "Yeah, you're going to New London, to sub school".

² E-3

³ E-4

That was in October of 1960. On October 20, 1960, I arrived in New London, CT to start my training, my two months training at submarine school. I didn't know exactly what to expect, but it was the first time I'd ever been on the East Coast.

One of the things that I'll always remember, after being there three or four days, it started to snow. I asked this one guy, because being from Texas that was an unusual thing to see. I asked this one guy, I said, "Well, what's the deal?"

He said, "Oh, it's just going to be a light snow, don't worry about anything."

When I got up the next morning, there was three feet of snow on the ground! I'll never forget, I asked that guy, "You mean that was a light snow?"

I said, "I don't want to see a heavy snow!"

I saw a couple that were quite heavy and it was interesting.

I graduated from submarine school on December 21st, 1960 and I received orders to USS *Razorback*, which was in San Diego. I was able to spend Christmas of 1960 with my family and I think I reported on board the last week in December, maybe the 29th or 30th of December.

I – You said you spent that Christmas with your family. Was this in Texas?

MB – Yes, in Texas.

I – Has your family always been from the Dallas area?

MB – Yes, my family has always been in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. I grew up in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. I graduated from High School there and attended North Texas State College before I joined the Navy. So, all my family is from that area. In fact, most of my family members that are still surviving are still in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

By the way, I was married while I was in the Navy. In fact, I was married when I joined the Navy. My wife was with me in Kingsville, TX. She didn't

go with me to Oklahoma, because it was just a six week training period and she didn't go with me to Submarine School because it was just two months.

So, on the way from Submarine School in New London, CT to USS *Razorback* in San Diego, CA, among other things, I stopped in Texas and picked her up, and she headed out to California with me when I reported aboard *Razorback*.

I got to *Razorback* around the 29th or 30th of December. {Laughs} As soon as I checked in, I heard one of the guys say, "Well, we're getting ready to go to WESTPAC."

I said, "What's 'WESTPAC'? I've never heard of 'WESTPAC' before".

He said, "Western Pacific. We're getting ready to go on a nine-month operation in the Western Pacific. We're going to Japan and to Pearl Harbor and to Guam."

My wife, at that time, was seven months pregnant. Her name is Faye. I had just enough time to get Faye settled down in a nice place, call my mother in Texas and ask her if she would come out and be with Faye when our daughter was born. She was born in May.

We got underway, either the last part of January or the first part of February, headed for the Western Pacific. That's when I started my qualifications. I received my qualification card and started to learn the many systems on the *Razorback*.

We stopped in Pearl Harbor. We stopped in Guam. And we stopped in an interesting little place called Chi Chi Jima. I had always heard of Iwo Jima, but I'd never heard of Chi Chi Jima. But I found out that Chi Chi Jima was the place that a future President of the United States was shot down during World War II. When George Bush⁴ was shot down, he was shot down on a mission over Chi Chi Jima, Japan.

In any event, it was a wonderful experience getting to know the guys on *Razorback*. I've been in a lot of situations in my life, and I will tell you this

⁴ (George Herbert Walker Bush, the 41st President of the United States)

right out – the men on that submarine left an indelible mark on my memory to this day. They were all wonderful men.

We all had to pull together. Everyone had to help everyone else. I immediately bonded with them, and I think they bonded with me in many ways.

They had to. Because I was one of the Cooks, so they had to take it or leave it. {Smiling} They always told me my cooking was halfway decent. I don't know if it was or if it wasn't. I know this – I tried my best to prepare good meals.

But anyway, we left Chi Chi Jima, sailed by Iwo Jima, and arrived in Yokosuka, Japan. We spent the next three months operating out of Yokosuka, Japan, which was also a very, very interesting place.

I – Yokosuka, at the time, was one of the primary U.S. Navy bases in the Western Pacific.

MB – That is correct.

I – There were a large number of submarines stationed there.

MB – I think most of the submarines were either stationed in Yokosuka or in Sasebo. Some people say “Sa-Say-Bow”, but I called it “Sas-a-Bow”, but you were either in Yokosuka or Sasebo.

We did special operations, which I can't get into right now, but we did special operations there for three months. During that three month period that we were operating out of Yokosuka, I qualified, which was a wonderful thing. It was one of the proudest moments in my life.

By the time we got back to Pearl Harbor, I was qualified. I had in my personnel record, “qualified in submarines”, which was a wonderful thing.

We got back to San Diego and spent, I guess, the rest of 1961 operating in and out of San Diego and then we transitioned up to the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in San Francisco.

One of the things I will always remember about being in the shipyard is that they cut a big hole in *Razorback's* side to put equipment in. I stood there for hours thinking, "Wait a minute now, I'm going back to sea after they weld up this hole in the side of this boat?" So I paid a lot of attention when they were doing the welding, but they x-rayed it.

I'm certain that some of the other guys who were on *Razorback* at that time have related this experience, but on our first trim dive out of the yards, we went **deep**.

Our test depth was 312 feet, but I can tell you I was standing in the After Battery Compartment and we passed 600 feet, and I know that for a fact, because I heard him calling it out⁵. The guys in the Forward Torpedo Room said we could have been 800 or 900 feet down.

I never did really find out what happened. Some guys said we lost control of the dive. Some guys said that the ballast tanks were not aligned right.

But that was one of the most interesting experiences I had on *Razorback*, and I'll tell you why – I wasn't afraid when it happened. I was standing in the After Battery Compartment hatch looking into the Control Room and I heard them calling out the depth. After we passed 400 feet, I thought to myself, "Boy this is interesting".

I was just prepared to go into the Control Room because I heard the Diving Officer give the "start blowing the tanks" to surface, I was going to blow the after group (of ballast tanks). But before I could get into the Control Room, they did blow the tanks and we did surface. And that's one of the memories that I shall never forget on *Razorback*.

After that, we had a real nice experience. We were assigned to the Seattle World's Fair. So we left San Diego and went up to Seattle and spent almost 30 days as a tour boat in Seattle, and it was real fun. We had a lot of people come on the boat. We had her all cleaned up and it was a wonderful thing to watch the people come through our submarine and get some idea of the experience of what it might be like to serve on a submarine.

⁵ The galley is in the forward-most end of the After Battery Compartment, next to the watertight hatch leading to the control room. All activity in the Control Room was easily heard by someone in the galley.

I – *Razorback* was just as popular in Seattle then as she is now here in Arkansas.

MB – I hear she’s popular here and that makes me very happy. It makes me very happy to come to North Little Rock, not just to the USSVI⁶ convention, but any time, and see her sitting majestically on this side of the river. It just puts a lump in my throat and a tear in my eye.

Because when I left *Razorback* in 1963...

The reason I got out of the Navy was to go back to college. The peacetime GI Bill was available at that time. I had just made Second Class Petty Officer⁷. Let me say this – making Second Class Commissaryman on your first enlistment was a **rare** thing back in that period. I received a letter from the Office of Naval Personnel telling me I was the youngest Second Class Commissaryman in the entire United States Navy (I was 23 years old). I still have that letter.

I – That’s a considerable achievement.

MB – My Executive Officer, CDR Tregurtha, told me that if I stayed in the Navy, I would probably be recommended for one of the officer’s candidate’s programs, but I didn’t want to do that. I got out of the Navy. I used all of my GI Bill benefits. I received my undergraduate degree at the University of Texas and my master’s at TCU⁸, and I’ve been in the Real Estate business for many years.

But I never really got *Razorback* out of my blood. I didn’t know how to use a computer. My daughter taught me how in 1998 and the first thing I did was to see if I could find *Razorback* on the Internet. And low and behold, I did!

I found this group called the USSVI. I got on the website and they had a membership roster. When I looked at that roster, I saw Max Basset’s name, Bob Oppe’s name, Bobby Barge’s name, guys that had been on

⁶ United States Submarine Veterans, Inc., a national organization of submarine veterans.

⁷ E-5

⁸ Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, TX

Razorback with me. I got in contact with those guys and had wonderful time rekindling old friendships.

Then one day, after about three years, in 2001, I get this call from Bob Oppe saying, "Hey".

I said, "Hey, Bob".

He said, "Guess what?"

I said, "Guess what, what?"

He said, "There's a guy in my office that said he just saw *Razorback*."

I said, "Just saw *Razorback* where?"

He said, "Well, he got back from Turkey. He was on assignment there. He works for some business and he said when he was in Turkey that he went aboard *Razorback*."

I said, "You've got to be kidding me!"

He said, "Yes, and they're getting ready to take her out of commission".

And so, that started the odyssey to get *Razorback* to North Little Rock. And so here we are today with *Razorback* back from Turkey and me one of the happiest guys in the world.

I – So, what was an average day like, cooking on a submarine?

MB – An average day on a submarine was like this. There were three Cooks. One Cook cooked all day, a 24-hour period. One guy baked all night and one guy relieved the second cook on the third day. So I would get up in the morning about 4:00, 0400, and cook breakfast. As soon as I got through with breakfast, I cooked the noon meal. As soon as got through with the noon meal, I prepared snacks for the mid-afternoon, what's called mid-afternoon rations. Then I would cook the evening meal and then I prepared "Mid-Rats"⁹

⁹ "Mid Rats" - "Midnight Rations", usually cold cuts, sliced cheeses, and condiments to allow crewmembers to make their own sandwiches.

Then I would be relieved by the Night Baker who would cook all the breads, cakes, pies, rolls and everything that would be needed for the basic three meals for the next day.

So it was basically 12 to 14 straight hours of working, of non-stop working, because as soon as you got through one meal, you had to prepare for the next meal.

It was real interesting, because we would take all the fresh food we could when we went to sea when we left San Diego, Yokosuka, or Pearl Harbor. But the fresh food would run out after about three weeks. So you could forget about tomatoes, vegetables, all that. So then it was a matter of cooking with dehydrated food, vegetables, everything.

Now we did have a frozen meat locker, but everything else was basically dehydrated, including milk, eggs, everything.

A Cook that had been on submarines for many years taught me how to take dehydrated eggs and mix them up in a certain way, scrambled, that you couldn't tell the difference between fresh eggs and dehydrated eggs. A lot of times the guys would never know when we ran out of fresh eggs and when we started using dehydrated eggs.

It was 14-hour day of hard work, but it was always fun, because most of the guys, although they were eating every three or four hours during the course of the day, would want to come in and get snacks. It was always our feeling as submarine Cooks, that we owed it to the guys; that anytime you wanted something to eat, you could come in and get it. That was just our deal.

Now, I'll tell you one interesting experience that happened when we were at sea between Pearl Harbor and San Diego. Our fresh meat locker refrigerator system went out. We had to throw all of the meat overboard, and all of our vegetables that we had down there in the cooler which is right outside the other locker. And the funny thing about it was, while we're throwing that meat over the side, there were sharks, because it was bloody – as red as your shirt – it was bloody. There were sharks up the kazoo while we were throwing that meat overboard, eating that meat.

Well, we still stayed at sea for another month. The only meat we had on board was Spam - old, green cans of Spam. On these cans were stamped information like this, "Guam -1943" and "Saipan – 1944", so that meat was from World War II. So, for breakfast, lunch and supper we had to do some kind of variation of a Spam order. Guys told me when we finally got back to shore that if they ever saw any Spam again on USS *Razorback* they were going to throw all the Cooks over the side. {Laughing} I'll tell you another funny story – I still do not allow Spam in my house to this day.

I – {Laughing} I can imagine.

MB - That's just another one of the many interesting things that happened on *Razorback*.

20:32

I – Now, you served aboard *Razorback* when she went through Operation Dominic, the Swordfish test, right?

MB – Yes, I did. I'm glad you brought that up. That was another very interesting experience. We didn't know, of course, or at least I didn't know, until we got underway, what we were going to be doing. So, it was Christmas Island was where we were heading for the test.

I – Which is not all that far from San Diego.

MB – It wasn't that far. It didn't take that long to get there. It didn't take that long to get back.

But, it was an interesting experience because the Captain prepped us for what was about to happen. He told us that we would be at periscope depth. I didn't realize this, I guess he told us this, because Bob Oppe, Bobby Barge and others have told me that, I think we were a mile and half, maybe two miles from the explosion. I didn't realize we were that close to the explosion.

I – According to the records that DOE released to me just recently, you were 2,000 yards.

MB – Well, there you are.

Well, here's what happened. There was a count-down and everyone told us to brace ourselves. If I remember right, they said to brace for two or three shockwaves. Well, the first one wasn't that bad. It was kind of a rumbling. But the second wave, I thought we were going to capsize. It was a rough, rough wave. It was an interesting experience.

What I remember more than anything else is that Max Bassett and six or seven other guys went topside after the explosion to hose down the sail and the decking and everything. I think that was before the days that people realized about radiation poisoning and all that kind of stuff. So I have wondered for years and years before I got back in touch with Max and Bob Opple and others if any of those guys had problems as a result of going topside. As far as I know that did not occur, because none of them have told me that anything ever happened. But, yes, that was yet another very interesting experience on *Razorback*, Operation Dominic.

I recently ordered a film from DOE.

I – We have that on DVD.

MB – I have the DVD and I saw us on the film, which I showed to my grandkids. The other thing that I was telling my grandkids, is that one time we were submerged, I think, for about 60 to 63 days. I kept the same clothes on for, I know, about 40 days.

And they said, "Ewww, Grandpa, how could you possibly do that?"

I said, "Well, I did, because everyone else did."

Although the Cooks and the Hospital Corpsman could take showers, but normally for the first two or three weeks at sea, the showers were full of food. After that, after going without a bath for three weeks to a month, what's the difference? {Laughs}

I – {Laughs} what's another few weeks?

MB – {Laughs} what's another two or three weeks without changing your clothes?

I'll say this about submarine duty, and I'll tell everyone this. It's not for everyone. But for the people that really made it, and the people who really bonded, and really made it an experience in their lives, I think it's something that none of us will ever forget, and I think it's something that all of us will be proud that we were able to do.

That's what I think.

I – Well, I appreciate your time and your thoughts.

MB – Why, thank you sir, and I appreciate you having me.