



*U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program*

Interview of **Steward 2/c John Noble Roberts, USCGR**  
African-American U.S. Coast Guard D-Day Veteran

Conducted by **C. Douglas Kroll, Ph. D., U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary**

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*Interviewer C. Douglas Kroll, left and Steward 2/c John Roberts, right.*

### **Biographical Summary**

Born in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana on 1 November 1924, John Roberts was working in a grocery store in Alexandria, Louisiana when he was drafted into the U.S. Coast Guard in June 1943. After basic training at Curtis Bay, Maryland from 25 June to 29 July 1943 he proceeded to St. Augustine, Florida for

Steward's Training. Traveling to Britain on a transport, he arrived there on 27 January 1944 and was assigned to the USS LCI(L) 91 for the next two months. At his request he was then reassigned to USS LCI(L) 93 on 16 April 1944. He participated in the D-Day landings and his vessel became stranded on a sandbank off Omaha Beach as the tide went out. Mr. Roberts was given a message to carry down to the engine room. As he made his way there a German shell struck the stranded vessel, blowing off his lower right leg and badly injuring his left. He was evacuated to the USS *Doyle* (DD-494) for emergency surgery.

Roberts spent six weeks in pain in Britain (northern Wales) in the Army's 83<sup>rd</sup> General Hospital and then was sent to the U.S. to spend his remaining time in the Naval Hospital in Philadelphia until he was discharged from the Coast Guard on 27 January 1945. A month later he moved to Los Angeles, California and would eventually devote himself to a career of developing prosthetic limbs and orthotic devices. About seven years ago he relocated to Santa Maria, California to live with an adult daughter so she could better care for his ailing wife.



***Steward Second Class John Roberts, USCGR***

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**INTERVIEWER:** Can you tell me when and where you were born?

**ROBERTS:** I was born in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you spell that for me?

**ROBERTS:** Natchitoches, N-A-T-C-H-I-T-O-C-H-E-S parish.

**INTERVIEWER:** And the date?

**ROBERTS:** 11-1-24.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you. Can you tell me briefly about your childhood and how you came to join the Coast Guard in World War II?

**ROBERTS:** I was raised on a farm. My dad was a farmer and we was six kids when my mother died. I was the oldest one. My brother next to me went into the Army, later after I went into the Coast Guard.

**INTERVIEWER:** Why did you decide to join the Coast Guard?

**ROBERTS:** I was drafted and they picked two from the group that went in for examination, two went into the Coast Guard, two went into the Navy, two in the Marines, and I think the rest of them went into the Army.

**INTERVIEWER:** When was that you were drafted or went into the Coast Guard?

**ROBERTS:** That was ... the day I went in to Curtis Bay was 6-25-43 and stayed there until 7-29-43.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you do basic training at Curtis Bay?

**ROBERTS:** Right and then they sent me to St. Augustine, Florida to finish my training.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you have any memories of your training at Curtis Bay? Anything stand out?

**ROBERTS:** Well, we marched, and they wanted to make sure that we knew how to swim.

**INTERVIEWER:** There was no swimming pool there, so did they just used the bay?

**ROBERTS:** I already knew how to swim, but I still had to get in the bay and show them I could swim.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was the basic training integrated with you and other races together?

**ROBERTS:** Well they were separate.

**INTERVIEWER:** So where you lived and ate was separate from the white recruits? What about the actual training classes, where they separate or were training classes together?

**ROBERTS:** That was all separate.

**INTERVIEWER:** When you were at Curtiss Bay, about how many fellow African-Americans were in training with you?

**ROBERTS:** Quite a few. Maybe a hundred.

**INTERVIEWER:** And then you said they sent you to St. Augustine.

**ROBERTS:** That is where they taught us how to prepare food and serve the officers. There were a lot of officers being trained at St. Augustine and they taught us more or less how to take care of the officers.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you volunteer to be a Steward or were you chosen for that rating?

**ROBERTS:** They put you where they needed you.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you got your Steward training at St. Augustine, Florida?

**ROBERTS:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you finished there and ....

**ROBERTS:** I was there at St. Augustine from 7-31-43- to 1-19-44.

**INTERVIEWER:** From St. Augustine where did you go?

**ROBERTS:** To Rahway, New Jersey. I went there, and left from there for overseas.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how did you get overseas from Rahway?

**ROBERTS:** By transport ship. I was there from 1-20-44 to 1-27-44.

**INTERVIEWER:** When you got to overseas, where did your transport ship land you?

**ROBERTS:** In England.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you go from the transport ship immediately to your ship the LCI(L)-93?

**ROBERTS:** That first LCI that I was assigned to was the 91. I stayed there from 2-15-44 to 4-16-44. I requested a transfer because me and the cook didn't get along, so I went to the commanding officer of the whole unit and told him I would like to be transferred because I was afraid something bad was going to happen.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was that because of the cook's racism?

**ROBERTS:** I don't know but I imagine that was the problem. He was walking around with a sidearm. He was the only one wearing a sidearm on a small ship like that. So when I went to the commander, I told him that if the cook ever pulled the gun on me he better use it because I was going to push one of these knives through him, because I was just that upset about why he was on the ship with a sidearm, and nobody else had guns. So the next day I was transferred to the 93. It was a completely different ship. The crew and everything was different. I was transferred on 4-16-44 to the 93 and stayed there until 6-6-44.

**INTERVIEWER:** On the 93 as with the 91, as a Steward did you wear a different uniform from everybody else or wear the same thing they did?

**ROBERTS:** I wore the same thing they did.

**INTERVIEWER:** What were your general duties on the 93?

**ROBERTS:** Preparing the food and taking care of the officers.

**INTERVIEWER:** How many officers were on the LCI?

**ROBERTS:** Two.

**INTERVIEWER:** According to my research the commanding officer was LTJG Budd Bornhoff. Is that correct?

**ROBERTS:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** So he was much better than the skipper of the 91?

**ROBERTS:** He was a lot better, and his assistant [XO, John J. O'Connor], I guess he was a Catholic and when we were in port we used to walk together to go to a little church [for Mass].

**INTERVIEWER:** So the relationships were much better on the 93?

**ROBERTS:** Like night and day.

**INTERVIEWER:** Also with the rest of crew?

**ROBERTS:** I never had any problem with any of them because they all didn't leave to go on a pass or anything at the same time. They had one [another African-American] that was a Gunner's Mate 3/c [Byron Spalding] and we used to talk a lot, but he was from Philadelphia.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was there just one berthing area on the 93?

**ROBERTS:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you all lived together in this berthing area?

**ROBERTS:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** Were you the only African-American aboard the 93?

**ROBERTS:** No, also this Gunners Mate from Philadelphia that I was telling you about. After I was wounded and sent back to the states, I was sent to Philadelphia. He undoubtedly wrote and told his family, I guess, so a couple of them came and visited me while I was in the hospital there.

**INTERVIEWER:** When you were aboard the 93, did they do any practice landings in England before D-Day?

**ROBERTS:** They did a couple of those.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was your assignment for General Quarters?

**ROBERTS:** I mainly stayed close to the Commanding Officer and if they were having a problem he would send me to go and help out. Like one time they practiced, they were letting the ramp out and it got caught on one of the banisters on the side and so I'm going try to help and get on top of the banister, I mean the cable, to try to get it loose. When it came loose it flipped me up and I came down in the water. But that water was cold, but it was o.k., I didn't get hurt or anything.

**INTERVIEWER:** You swam back to the ship?

**ROBERTS:** I more or less just came up the ramp, because after it came loose it came all the way down.

**INTERVIEWER:** How was the food and the living conditions aboard the 93?

**ROBERTS:** The food was good, except when we had troops on. When we had troops we had eat the K-rations just like the troops did. But other than that we had pretty good food.

**INTERVIEWER:** How did the LCI (L) – 93 ride going across the English Channel?

**ROBERTS:** It was rough! I was sea sick every time we left the dock and never got use to rough seas.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was the relationship between the crew and the troops when they were aboard.

**ROBERTS:** Pretty good, I would say. When we went to Normandy to put the troops off, all of them came off but one. He just refused to get off. I guess he saw what was going on on the beach that day and he refused to get off. So the Commanding Officer told me to go and get his name, his unit and all that. So I went down to the berthing, because he went down to our barracks. So I went and got that and brought it back to him. After he got the first load off, at about 10 o'clock we went back to one of the big transport ships and picked up another load of troops. I was just a short trip from the transport ship to the beach. As we went back with our second load, the tides were going out. We got sand barged and after the troops got off we couldn't get off and that [was] when the Germans saw what must have been going on and they started to shell us. I was taking a message from the Commanding Officer to the engine room, because the intercom was no longer working. He told me to go down to the engine room and tell them to rev the engines full to try to get us off, as I was coming down from where he was to the main deck, about halfway down, that when a shell came through and exploded underneath me. It took my leg off from my knee down, my foot was gone completely and it was skin and bone from my knee down. I remember hopping off the ladder down to the deck and called for help. In the meantime--Pharmacist Mate Charles Mudgett was there, he came and put a tourniquet on me, on my leg and that saved my life I'm sure. I had nothing but my two hands to hold my leg to control the bleeding until he got there. After that they put me on a stretcher. I was waiting out there to be taken out to one of the bigger ships. I think the DOYLE (DD-494) was the one they took me to. It had 5-inch guns on it and after I was on that I thought it was shells hitting us on that ship, but it was them firing, try to get rid of the Germans that was doing all the damage.

**INTERVIEWER:** What kind of a boat did they take you from the 93 to the DOYLE?

**ROBERTS:** It was just a small boat, it might have been one of those little ones with a landing ramp in the front.

**INTERVIEWER:** Like a landing craft [Higgins Boat]?

**ROBERTS:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** [How] long was it between the time you were injured before they could take you to the larger ship?

**ROBERTS:** It was at least an hour or two. When I was in the stretcher on the deck of 93, waiting to be taken off to the big ship for treatment, the ship must have shifted a little bit and hit a mine. Sand and water and everything came up and then came down on my face, which kind of made me angry.

By that time they were evacuating the entire crew. The guy that put the tourniquet on me, he stayed with me until they took me into surgery. After that I don't know if the rest of the crew stayed on the DOYLE or what. But the next morning I woke up and was hungry. They soon transferred me to another ship to transport me back to England. There were just wounded Americans on one side and they had wounded Germans on the other side of the ship. They had a prison or something that they were taking them to. The guy that brought me something to eat, I asked him who they were because I saw they were dressed differently. He said they were wounded Germans.

**INTERVIEWER:** How did you view the Germans at that point in time?

**ROBERTS:** Well, I don't know. It just was at that time I was worried more about whether I was going to make it, than I was about them.

**INTERVIEWER:** What happened when you got to England?

**ROBERTS:** They took me to the [Army's] 83<sup>rd</sup> General Hospital. That is where they were taking all the wounded. I stayed there for six weeks: 6-7-44 until 7-21-44. Then I went to Philadelphia.

**INTERVIEWER:** You went on liberty in England. How were you treated by the English people?

**ROBERTS:** The older people would offer their homes for you to stay in and I went a couple of times to spend the night.

**INTERVIEWER:** There were also other armed forces in England at the time. How were the relations between them and members of the Coast Guard? Were there rivalries, animosities, friendships?

**ROBERTS:** We didn't have too much of a problem over there because England wasn't as bad as the United States as far as segregation.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you had much less problems there than in the United States? So you came back to Philadelphia on a ship. Was that the Philadelphia Naval Hospital?

**ROBERTS:** The Red Cross picked me up from the ship to take me to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. I hadn't had a haircut in all of that time, so she takes me, before she takes me to the ward of the hospital, she takes me to the barber shop. He said she would have to come back after lunch because it was time for him to go to lunch. So the meantime he must have checked to find out what was my race or something and then he refused to cut my hair. She came back to get me and felt so bad that the barber wouldn't give me a haircut.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was your treatment like at the hospital?

**ROBERTS:** The treatment was pretty good.

**INTERVIEWER:** So they treated you just like any other wounded veteran?

**ROBERTS:** Yes, they kind of had you separated, but still in the same ward. I stayed there from 7-21-44 to 1-27-45.

**INTERVIEWER:** When they discharged you from the hospital, did they discharge you from the Coast Guard?

**ROBERTS:** No, they discharged me from the hospital and sent me to a discharge center in New Orleans.

**INTERVIEWER:** After you got to New Orleans, did you have to wait very long to get discharged?

**ROBERTS:** Just about three days. They wanted me to stay in the segregated quarters in the basement and share a bed with someone else. Plus the area was filthy. I went to the sick bay and was allowed to stay there.

**INTERVIEWER:** The day they discharged you was?

**ROBERTS:** 1-27-45.

**INTERVIEWER:** Were there any chiefs on the 93?

**ROBERTS:** One chief. I think he was a Boatswain's Mate.

**INTERVIEWER:** What would you say was our most memorable experience in the Coast Guard, outside of D- Day?

**ROBERTS:** I would say it was when I got to the 93 in England. It was so much different than the 91. I went to an LCI reunion several years ago and met one of the guys I served with on the 93 and he told me that our skipper had died and had been living in Palm Springs. If I had known that, I would definitely have driven out to see him.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you remember your discharge day in New Orleans?

**ROBERTS:** Well they discharged me and I came back to my home, where my dad and brothers and sisters lived. I stopped in Alexandria before I went home, because I had been working there before I went into the service. I worked in a grocery store with one of my dad's cousins. I worked there until I was drafted. When I came back, I stopped there first and then I went down to where my dad lives, on the river, the Cane River. I stayed about a month and then came out to California.

**INTERVIEWER:** Were you treated any differently when you got back to Louisiana as a wounded veteran, or was it the same as before you left?

**ROBERTS:** Basically the same, but a small article was put in the *Natchtoches Times*. I was offered an opportunity to buy a farm but I didn't want to do that with my disability.

**INTERVIEWER:** What brought you to California?

**ROBERTS:** I had aunts and cousins [in the Los Angeles area]. I came to California before I went in the service. I stayed out here about two or three months and then I went back to Louisiana and was drafted. I thought it would be easier to find a job and have more opportunities for my future.

It made me feel good when I received a letter from the Secretary of Defense congratulating me on taking a job with Douglas Aircraft. Also a letter from Skipper Bornhoft saying how much he and the crew admired my spirit when I was so badly injured.

**INTERVIEWER:** My last question. Is there anything I didn't ask or didn't cover that you think are important for future generations to know?

**ROBERTS:** Even though my life has been difficult at times with my disability I am glad I decided early on to make the most of my life. I didn't talk about my experiences in the war much before this attention lately, but it did help make me the person I became.

**INTERVIEWER:** Where were you when they presented you with your Purple Heart medal?

**ROBERTS:** They gave me one at 83<sup>rd</sup> General Hospital in England. But that didn't go in my records, because they thought I was in the Navy. So when I got discharged in New Orleans, the people that were discharging me said that it wasn't in my record and they called and I got the official one in my record.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

