

## Moriarty AMERICA 250 Transcript

**Biographical Sketch: Biographical Sketch:** Capt. Tom (Thomas Harris) Moriarty (1917-2009) served as the CO of the USS Rapidan (AO-18) before and during World War 2. He resided in Birmingham most of his life, graduating from Birmingham Southern College in 1939. He joined the Navy on Dec 8, 1942 and went to the Naval Academy where he was commissioned an ensign in 1942 and joined the Rapidan in Iceland. Rapidan was a transport ship in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, then in Alaska. After WW2, Moriarty stayed in the active reserves at NAS Birmingham and NAS Atlanta before becoming CO of the Naval Reserve Station in Birmingham (to retirement in 1977). He then became VP of First National Bank of Birmingham (later AmSouth then Regions bank) and in retirement worked for twelve years in the Birmingham Southern College Alumni Affairs Office. He outlived his first wife, Mabelle Felch, and later married Pauline Edwards of Dothan. Moriarty's obituary lists seven daughters as his children.

### 00:00:00 Marty Olliff

Captain Tom Moriarty of Montgomery and Dothan enlisted in the U.S. Navy soon after Pearl Harbor, and after training, he asked to be assigned to PT boats. The Navy saw fit, however, to assign him to the *USS Rapidan*, an 18,000-ton fleet oiler.

He discusses his recruitment and assignment, the Rapidan's arrival in Casablanca the night in 1943 when the Germans bombed the harbor, and the Rapidan's being torpedoed by a U-boat near the Caribbean island Aruba. The Rapidan was in the Aleutian Islands when, from December 1945 to February 1946, Moriarty served as its captain.

Upon his discharge in 1946, Moriarty switched to naval aviation and remained in active reserve until 1973. Captain Moriarty talked with Tom Norman in 2009.

In this first clip, Moriarty discusses enlisting in December 1941 and how he got to attend the U.S. Naval Academy Midshipman School in a 120-day engineering course.

### 00:01:11 Tom Moriarty

The day after Pearl Harbor, I felt very noble, and I decided that I was going to help him win the war right then. I went to the Navy Recruiting Station in Birmingham, Alabama, and it seemed like they didn't want to let me go or anything. I signed up actually in the middle of January of 1942.

They signed me up as an apprentice seaman. I just hoped I wasn't going to stay there. But in March or April, I got a notice from the Navy stating that although I had signed up to go to the

Midshipman School at Northwestern University in Chicago, they had looked over all of my studies at Birmingham Southern and what else had done, and decided that they're not going to send me to Northwestern.

But I reported on May 15th of 1942 to the Naval Academy. I had no idea when I was signing up that I was going to the Naval Academy. They wanted me to go to Annapolis where they had reserve engineering school. We were reserves in special school there, which was 120 days. We were studying everything mechanical and mathematical.

One day somebody mentioned radar and they shut everybody up. They said, "Nope, you don't know anything about this."

**00:02:36 Marty Olliff**

After training, Moriarty requested assignment to PT boats, but was assigned to the fleet tanker USS *Rapidan* in September 1942.

**00:02:47 Tom Moriarty**

When the time came first to put down our request, I checked :Auxiliary Ships: PT boats. That's what I put down. So when I graduated on the 8th of September of 1942, that's when I was commissioned. They gave me an auxiliary vessel alright, but it was a Navy fleet tanker, *USS Rapidan*. Our job was to refuel the fleet at sea.

I didn't realize what I was getting into. I stayed on that same ship for four years. Ended up as skipper.

**00:03:20 Marty Olliff**

Moriarty describes a convoy to Casablanca, Morocco, and the surprise German bombing of the harbor in January 1943.

**00:03:29 Tom Moriarty**

They were getting ready to make the landings in North Africa. We were headed out on a big convo of about 75-80 ships. Because we were an old tanker, we couldn't run as fast as the new carriers and things like that. We would refuel the escort vessels every two or three days all the way across the Atlantic.

And we went to Casablanca. We landed there on New Year's Eve of 1943. Two o'clock in the morning, You had all kinds of noises and sirens and everything else.

They didn't have enough room in the harbor for us to go in, so we anchored our ship 2 miles out off the coast right out in the ocean. Since we've been dodging submarines all the way across, here we were sitting out there as a sitting duck. We felt very uncomfortable.

But about two o'clock in the morning, the Germans, even though they weren't supposed to be there, had taken over several air bases in southern Spain. They sent their big bombers down to Casablanca because they had heard that a convoy had just come in there. So they was dropping bombs all around us.

**00:04:35 Marty Olliff**

Back on fuel transport runs in the Caribbean, Moriarty talks about the Rapidan testing the Mark 29 anti-torpedo gear that detonated a German torpedo 100 yards off of the ship's starboard quarter and the damage that forced the Rapidan to limp back to Charleston in September 1943.

**00:04:58 Tom Moriarty**

When we left Norfolk on this trip, we were on our way down to Aruba, where we could pick up a load of fuel oil. We were about six or seven hundred miles southeast of Charleston, South Carolina, on our way down there, when all of a sudden, about three o'clock in the afternoon, this kid that was manning our M29 gear, that's when he called me and he says, "Mr. Moriarty," he said.

"Yeah," I said, "Yeah?"

He said, "That sounds exactly like those records we've been listening to."

So I went in there and listened. I just happened to have the watch that day. And it was just whining sound, louder, louder, louder. I said, "That's a torpedo coming!" I said, "Sound the general quarters alarm and arm that **poses** out there."

And that thing kept coming for about five to same minutes. It aiming at us. And all of a sudden, a tremendous explosion and a line of water about 50 feet high, all the way down the side of the ship, where the torpedo itself was blown up.

**We stopped trying to see what the deal was, whether anything had been done to us.**

And you know, that's the most lonesome feeling you have ever seen in this world, is to watch the convoy, it doesn't stop, go over the hill in front of you, and there's a sub out there.

One of our kids looked down and they said, "We've got about 15 to 20 feet of water." On a tanker, right at midships, they have steam-powered pumps, and they pump gasoline and oil out of the tanks, into hoses out of the ships.

He went down in there and he said, "we got 15 feet of water down in our pump room and it's coming up all the time." So he went swimming down in that 15 feet of oily water and started up those steam pumps and it started bringing the water down.

We turned around, headed back toward Charleston. And it was a big heavy storm starting just about dark. And we ran all night long in that heavy storm. Submarines don't operate very well on the surface, and they couldn't keep up with us, so we ran away from him. Two days or so, we went into Charleston.

It was the most labor-intensive thing I've ever seen. When **we were mounting all that stuff and putting it out overseas, every man in the whole crew,** they're working through. This Mark 29 gear was being tried out, and it turned out that it worked exactly like they thought it did.

**00:07:28 Marty Olliff**

Deployed to the Aleutian Islands in Alaska, Moriarty became skipper of the Rapidan.

**00:07:35 Tom Moriarty**

They thought we had such good experience in the Arctic when they sent us Alaska and Aleutian Islands. The Japanese were bombing the western Aleutian Islands. And I finished the war out there. I took over the ship while we were up in there.

**00:07:50 Marty Olliff**

Captain Moriarty discusses his time in the Naval Reserve and his switch to Naval Aviation until retiring in 1973.

**00:08:00 Tom Moriarty**

I was going to back to the reserve and I went into aviation on my own in 1940. I took pilot training and I had a pilot's license. At that time, the Navy put a naval air station at the airport in Birmingham. I was on active duty then, but I stayed in that.