

**EI-1025**

**ROBERT ISLEY**

**BIRTHDATE: JULY 16, 1921**

**INTERVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 9, 1998**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 77**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: Melanie Plasencia**

**AGE:**

**SHIP:**

**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES:**

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1998. I'm in the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Bob Isley. Bob was stationed at Ellis Island in the Coast Guard. He was here off and on between July of 1944 and June of 1945. I also want to say for the sake of the tape that Kevin Daley is running the recording equipment. Bob, it's nice to have you out here. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

ISLEY: I was born on July the 16<sup>th</sup>, 1921.

SIGRIST: Okay. And where were you born?

ISLEY: I was born in Newark, New Jersey.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Not too far away.

ISLEY: Not too far.

SIGRIST: Can you give me kind of a thumbnail sketch of your own family background? Nationality, that sort of thing.

ISLEY: Far as--far as we know uh, all the background uh, the family came from either England or Scotland. We don't have much input on where they came from. My mother at one time went through a great deal of background search and she got back as far as the Mayflower and that's where it ended. (laughs)

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: We don't know anything more than that.

SIGRIST: (chuckles) So your parents were both born here in the United States?

ISLEY: Yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And just for the sake of the tape, give me your father's name.

ISLEY: Father was Raymond.

SIGRIST: Raymond?

ISLEY: Raymond Alfred Isley.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Isley?

ISLEY: I-S-L-E-Y.

SIGRIST: Thank you. And his profession?

ISLEY: Dad was a salesman, a wool salesman.

SIGRIST: Wool.

ISLEY: Wool, yeah. And back in the old days, when they used to travel all over, he traveled all over the country selling wool. (chuckles)

SIGRIST: Do you, as a child, have any specific memories about your father and his--his wool salesmanship?

ISLEY: Not the salesmanship, particularly. We didn't have a very close-knit family. Mother and Dad were divorced when I was very young. So I--I went and lived with my mother and I don't remember Dad too much.

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: Consequently, I can't give you too much on that. I do remember going with him on these different places we had to go cause' he moved around a lot. He went to--oh, we went to Philadelphia. We lived in Chicago. We lived in Milwaukee. In other words, we--typical salesman's getting around. (chuckles)

SIGRIST: Tell me one thing that sticks out in your mind about your father when you were a kid.

ISLEY: I--I don't really know. I can't really tell because we weren't that close. I was only about five or six when they were divorced.

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

ISLEY: Ethel.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

ISLEY: Thomson without the P.

SIGRIST: Okay. So-

ISLEY: (laughs)

SIGRIST: T-H-O-M-S-O-N.

ISLEY: S-O-N. Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay. And same--same question for her. Tell me something about your mother when you were a kid that sticks out in your mind.

ISLEY: Oh, Mother was very strict. I can remember--matter of fact, I can give you a pretty good example there. I remember when I was very little, I got a fire truck for my birthday. And I did something very wrong; I don't remember now what it was. But I never saw that fire truck again. It went up in the closet and that was the end of it. And it's funny that that comes

out because (laughs) I remember that very specifically. But Mom was--was--she was hurt by the divorce. And consequently, living with her was always--I never got to know my father, I think because of that. I--I think Mom--Mom kind of felt very badly about that. [tape off/on] As I grew older, I came to be able to distinguish between the two. And matter of fact, it wasn't until after we were married, my wife and I were married, that I got to know my dad. We got together with him. He had remarried, moved up into the Boston area and we saw a lot of them. I saw more of my father, from the time I was married, than I did when I was a youngster, believe it or not. It was very strange.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were there brothers and sisters?

ISLEY: No.

SIGRIST: No.

ISLEY: The only child.

SIGRIST: Only child.

ISLEY: Yeah, yeah. (chuckles)

SIGRIST: Tell me, how old were you when you went into the Coast Guard?

ISLEY: Twenty-one.

SIGRIST: Twenty-one.

ISLEY: Hmm.

SIGRIST: Sum up what you were like as a--as a child growing up. What was your personality like? How would you describe yourself as you were growing up?

ISLEY: I think maybe withdrawn. I had the usual childhood. You know, I played--played sports, never too good at school. I eked by in school, went to arts school when I got out of high school. And I think the time, say, when I joined the Coast Guard, it was a case of--and I look back on it--at the time, I didn't think that much about it. I think at the time I was ready to get out of the family and get off on my own, because I can remember when--when I enlisted. I went down to the Coast Guard. I didn't tell my

mother. I came home and told her, "I'm going in the Coast Guard." "Well, ach!" (laughs) That sort of thing. And we were over at my--my uncle and my aunt's house and she was going on about it. And my uncle said, "Ethel, for heaven's sakes, let him go out on his own." And I--I remember that very specifically. It was sort of--and from there on it, and I think I became more--more outgoing. Of course, when you get in the service, you do. You--you know, it's survive or get thrown under. (chuckles)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about why you wanted to enlist in the Coast Guard. I mean, you mentioned you wanted to get out of the family but-

ISLEY: You want to know the real reason why I went in the Coast Guard? (chuckles)

SIGRIST: Yes.

ISLEY: So I didn't have to go in the Army. (laughs)

SIGRIST: That's a good reason as any. (chuckles)

ISLEY: No, but a--actually, yeah. The Coast Guard was taking enlistments then. They were a very small group then. And matter of fact, in that January, I believe it was, they opened up for reservists to come in.

SIGRIST: January of '44?

ISLEY: Of--no, no, no.

SIGRIST: 1940--

ISLEY: '41.

SIGRIST: In 19--

ISLEY: '42.

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: '42.

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: And when I heard that I thought, 'Well, that sounds good. I'd--I'd like to have a nice, warm place to sleep on a ship, rather than a foxhole.' You know, being a little facetious about it but basically, that's why I went in,

and the fact that I always like the water. I always liked the sea. I liked boats. I liked the ships and things. I can remember as a little kid when the fleet used to come into New York City, the big boats would come in. Mother would always take me over and we'd go aboard these big ships. And I'd sit there and look up at the tops of these and I'd think, 'Some day I'm going to be on one of these.' Well, I did. (laughs) Only under different circumstances than I had hoped.

SIGRIST: Were there any military people in your family on either side?

ISLEY: Way, way back when, I had a relative. I--he was in the Revolution. He was the colonel. Colonel Lockwood and he was from Connecticut. And in our mother's research, she found that he served with Washington during the Revolution. Beyond that, I don't know. Dad--Dad was--he tried to enlist in World War I but he had a game leg and they wouldn't take him. They wouldn't even take him in the Red Cross to drive a Red Cross vehicle. I remember him telling me that he--one time, he and a friend of his went off and they got on a train. It was going to Georgia because they were enlisting people. So they got on this train, didn't tell anybody. (chuckles) Didn't tell his mother or his father, anybody. And he wound up in Georgia and when they got down there they said, "What are you doing here?" And so they sent him home. They didn't send his friend home. They took him in there but Dad was--was sent back because of his bad knee.

SIGRIST: How--how did his leg become that way?

ISLEY: I don't know. I don't know where he got that from.

SIGRIST: Hmm. You mentioned your mother had a rather adverse reaction to your going into the Coast Guard. Why do you suppose?

ISLEY: I think she just wanted to hold on. I think that's about the size of it. I mean, she was a wonderful person. She was a great, great person. But she had that possessiveness about her, even when I was in high school, you know. "You're going out for football? What--what is going--you're going to get hurt." I said, "I get hurt crossing the street too." You know. So (chuckles)--

SIGRIST: Tell me what the process was for you to enlist. What did you have to do to do that?

ISLEY: Well, first of all, we did the obvious. We went down and signed up at--in downtown New York. And then I think I waited, oh, almost a month before I finally got the okay to come down. We took our physical and passed the physical.

SIGRIST: You're saying "we." Was--were there other people?

ISLEY: Well, everybody that went down.

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: I mean, we went to the one general place. Yeah. We finally got our call to come down and report downtown and we were sent over for--sent over to Manhattan Beach in downtown Brooklyn there and where I spent my boot camp.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

ISLEY: Oh, 21.

SIGRIST: Twenty-one. So you were well out of school at that point?

ISLEY: Yeah. I had--I had graduated in 1939 from high school. I had gone to art school and then, because money got tight, Mother said, "Well, I can't--we can't send you to art school anymore," even though it was free. But she still needed money to get--because Dad was supposedly sending money, I guess. And it wasn't that much back in those times. So I went to work in New York for a while, and maybe that was one of the reasons I enlisted in the Coast Guard too (chuckles) was to get out of that.

SIGRIST: Yes. What were you doing?

ISLEY: I was just a mail clerk. I went in, worked at a--a place in New York. Can I name--name the place?

SIGRIST: Sure.

ISLEY: It was American Hard Rubber Company. I don't know whether it's still around or not.

SIGRIST: American Hard Rubber Company.

ISLEY: Hard Rubber. Yeah, they were on Canal Street. And I went in as a--a mail clerk, a mail boy. And I gradually advanced to the purchasing department, the grand total of \$21 a week. Can you imagine? So then I went in the Coast Guard and got \$21 a month. (laughter)

SIGRIST: It's a difference.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: (laughs) So you spent your boot camp at Manhattan Beach.

ISLEY: Manhattan Beach.

SIGRIST: And that's in Brooklyn, you said?

ISLEY: Yeah, it's in Sheepshead Bay.

SIGRIST: Tell me about Coast Guard boot camp.

ISLEY: Coast Guard boot camp was get you in and get you out as fast as they could. They needed warm bodies. We were there about six weeks, I guess, was all and went through the routine. And this was February, March. This was the coldest part of the year. And we went to the--they taught us everything about boating and never told us what we were going to get into, of course, because no one knew. But I can remember going out some mornings and they used to have these big whale boats out on Sheepshead Bay. Did a lot of rowing. I mean, that--they seemed to think that was the thing to do was to row. We'd go out and scoop the snow off the thwarts to row these boats around Sheepshead Bay. Went to athletic classes. You know, they had you box a little bit and they had you climb ropes. Didn't teach us to swim, though. I couldn't swim when I went in the Coast Guard, believe it or not. (laughs) Well, I figured the closest land, you know, was a mile. It was a mi--maybe a mile down. But still--but they taught us--taught us the different things that we'd have to go through, routine. Marching, always marching, getting out on the drill fields, you know. Get some guy out there. Then they'd teach you which was your left foot, which was your right foot and how to turn without bumping into the fellow next door to you.

SIGRIST: Were there any specific skills that they taught you, other than just marching and rowing? Any--

ISLEY: No, just-

SIGRIST: Certain pieces of information?

ISLEY: the basic skills you needed to be a seaman, which was how to obey orders, never volunteer, the usual clichés. (laughs)

SIGRIST: You said that lasted six weeks?

ISLEY: About six weeks.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Then what happened?

ISLEY: In six weeks, I shipped out. They sent me to Norfolk, Virginia and I was--well, I'm going on a ship. I'm going on a--going on a warship. Right? Well, I wound up a buoy tender out of Norfolk--were the old workhorses of the Coast Guard was the old buoy tenders and we were stationed in Portsmouth. And I was on that for, oh, well, just a little over a year, I guess. Maybe a year and a half or so. It was--it was kind of exciting. We stayed around the Norfolk area and Hampton Roads. Used to go out in the--the big channels that came in from the ocean, changed the buoys and hoped that there were no submarines out there, of course. It was usual routine, nothing--nothing particularly exciting.

SIGRIST: Did any of what you learned at boot camp--did you put any of that into practice doing this particular-

ISLEY: Yeah, how to obey orders. (chuckles) That's about the size of it. Because they--they d--in boot camp, they don't teach you any specifics because you never know where you're going. Some of the ones that were with me in boot camp, they went right away. They went on patrol boats. Some went on--on surf duty, pounding the beaches, which they had a lot of back in those days. They had all the--all the--the horseback riders, you know, would patrol the beaches was great hysteria about U-boats landing spies and so on and so forth.

SIGRIST: This is roughly the beginning of World War II that you're talking about.

ISLEY: Yes, it was. Yeah, this was March--it was April.

SIGRIST: Right.

ISLEY: March and April of 1942.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me how you ended up at Ellis Island in July of 1944.

ISLEY: Well, after the service aboard the buoy tender, I was transferred or I was assigned to a destroyer escort, which was convoy duty between the United States and the Mediterranean.

SIGRIST: You're saying destroyer escort.

ISLEY: Yeah, it's a--it was a-a patrol boat. It was a anti-aircraft boat. It was used for escorting convoys. There was six of us in--six boats in a division. And we made trips back and forth between Norfolk, Mediterranean and back.

SIGRIST: Any place specifically in the Mediterranean?

ISLEY: Well, our first trip went to Casablanca. After that, we went on into the Mediterranean, wound up in-in Bazurti [Interviewee could be talking about the town of Burundi] over in North Africa. And on that particular convoy, we encountered a German air raid going in. And the interesting thing about the Mediterranean tours was, we not only had the U-boats to worry about; we had aircraft to worry about. We had a kind of a two-two-bladed sword there. And on the way in, we were attacked off Algiers by some German-German bombers. I don't know what their Stukas--one of--that type of thing. And they did quite a bit of damage to the convoy. They blew up an ammunition ship with 400 and some odd Army pyrotechnic technicians aboard, killed every one of them. I mean, they lost some 500 on a boat. They also sank a American destroyer, the Lansdale. And the Menges, which was my ship, and another, the Newell, we were instrumental in picking up survivors from the Lansdale. We--I was put in a--in the small boat. And we went out and were hauling them out of the water. The big boats came in and they would dive overboard and pull these kids up, you know. And we saved quite a bit of them. One of them, incidentally, was Henry Morgenthau's son, who was the Secretary of Treasury, I believe, at the time. And we pulled his son out of the water and brought him back. And we took the survivors all into-into--I think it was Algiers we went into with it then. And--oh, and at the same time, when we were on the way back in, someone spotted two fellows in a--in a life raft. And we weren't sure what they were. And so we pulled over and we pulled these two guys up and--and the first one got on deck and he says, "Heil Hitler." It was two German fliers that had been shot down. And we--we captured them, took them and turned them over to the authorities when we got on board. (laughter) So--so then from there on, we unloaded our cargo and--and joined--rejoined the cargo, went to Bazurti. We laid over there, picked up another group coming back. And we got just about the same place that we were air raided and we picked up a-a little blip one night, May the 3<sup>rd</sup>. I'll never forget that night. We went back to investigate it. And anyhow, to make a long story short, we were torpedoed. We-

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about that experience.

ISLEY: Well, that was probably the--you could say the highlight because there's things I never--you don't forget about that sort of thing. I remember I was on watch. I was on duty. And we went back. We were told that this blimp was there, went back. We lost it. And we started to search for it. And the next thing you know, there was this loud bang, like someone slamming a big steel door. And the ship kind of shuddered and, "What is that?" And then there was another bang just after that. And it turns out we had been torpedoed. We lost thirty-some odd crew members and twenty-six were injured. Some, of course, were never found because

they were on the fantail where we were hit. But what it did was, the first torpedo blew the fantail apart. The second torpedo, when it hit it, it bent it up and almost sealed off the hole in there so we stayed afloat. Well, now, here we are. We're-we're--we have no motor-motor power at all. And we're floating around here and we can see in the moonlight. The moon is up; it's been a clear night and it--the path of the moon coming down. We could watch the submarine as he went through that moon path and then he'd go around, and wondering why he didn't finish us off. Well, it turns out that he thought we were going to sink because we had--we had three torpedoes on board. And the torpedoes, when the--when we were torpedoed, it-it jarred the torpedoes in such a way that they began to smoke. And-and the sub captain saw that and thought that, 'Well, they're going to go down. Why should I waste a very valuable torpedo on that ship?' So he just circled and circled and circled. And eventually, help came to us. They towed us back to Oran, where we stayed for, oh, better part of a month while they put a--they sealed off the damage, put a jury rig on us, towed us back to New York and, which brings us up to when I came to Ellis Island. (laughter)

SIGRIST: Well, great. I wanted to get that on tape. Before we leave the torpedo situation, tell me a little bit about your personal experience during that. You told me what happened to the ship. But what was going on with you exactly during that torpedoing?

ISLEY: Well, I can remember--I had a very good friend who was a quartermaster. And when we were hit, he came running out seeing if I was all right. And-and I was. I don't remember too much about my own reactions, other than, "What's going to happen next?" And being a little concerned, again, watching that submarine and knowing he's circling us. But no particular feeling, other than what is back there, the--the people that were killed, lying wounded. I can remember going back and--and helping bring people forward to the forward part of the ship. We had lost our doctor. He had gone to a merchant ship just before that to help somebody else out. So there was no doctor aboard. But we had a chief pharmacist mate who got an award for taking care of people. But I-I really don't remember being particularly, mmm, what would you say, rattled? I mean, my heart was going like mad. I'm--really, there--(laughs) I can't remember too much about it.

SIGRIST: So you end up back in New York.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then what happens?

ISLEY: Well, we have survivor leave. We have 30 days of survivor leave, which is where I met my wife.

SIGRIST: Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

ISLEY: Yeah. (chuckles) And then after that, I came back to Ellis Island and awaiting another ship. And I was told that yes, they had a ship for me and as--my recollection was it was the-the U.S. Sheliak, which turned out to be an ammunition ship.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

ISLEY: Sheliak? Oh, boy. S-H-E-L-I-A-K.

SIGRIST: Now, you just said "back to Ellis Island." When were you brought here initially?

ISLEY: I guess right after we came back from--when I came from survival--I--it's very hazy right now. I mean, 50 years does a lot to your memory. I don't recall whether we were brought to Ellis Island before or after the survivor leave. We might have gone right off the ship because I was one of the few members of the ship that was left aboard when we brought it back. We were towed back from North Africa to-to New York with a tugboat in another convoy. And that's another story too. We got--we got almost back to Bermuda and we got a hurricane warning. You know, here we are on the long end of a towrope. So they towed us into Bermuda and we sat out the hurricane in there and then came back home. To get back to the Ellis Island bit, I don't recall whether we did. But I do know that we--I did wind up here.

SIGRIST: Were you here for the thirty days?

ISLEY: No.

SIGRIST: Oh. No.

ISLEY: Thirty-

SIGRIST: Where were you for those thirty days?

ISLEY: You mean-

SIGRIST: For your leave.

ISLEY: Home.

SIGRIST: Home in Newark.

ISLEY: In Newark. I stayed with my mother there, yeah. But-

SIGRIST: And then how did you end up here? How did that--do you recall?

ISLEY: Well, when I-

SIGRIST: To report or-

ISLEY: Report back for duty.

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: As I recall, when my orders came through, it said, "After your 30 days, you will report to Ellis Island, New York." And came over here and then I was assigned a bunk out in the big hall there. And-

SIGRIST: How long were you here before you then went on to the ammunition ship, do you think?

ISLEY: Well, I never did get on the ammunition ship.

SIGRIST: You never did get on it.

ISLEY: I was transferred off before the actual fact.

SIGRIST: I see.

ISLEY: (chuckles) Oh, I guess we were here--I was here probably three, four months.

SIGRIST: Oh, great. Well, let's-

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Why don't we talk about that time period then? What-what things stick out in your mind about being here for-for that amount of time?

ISLEY: Boredom. Sheer boredom. There was absolutely nothing to do. We were assigned menial duties. Being a petty officer, I--I was assigned to the--to monitor the petty officer of the--I was petty officer of the watch. While we were here, we had--there was the brig down below where they put the--all the bad boys. And we used to pull duty down there. The one that I remember most was the seawall watch. The--they would have the young seamen--they'd give them a rifle and they would walk the seawall.

And my duty was to go out, make sure that they were walking the seawall. And this is in the middle of winter now. And I can remember going out and finding spots where there were no seamen on the seawall. (chuckles) And then I had to go find them. And you'd find them in the most odd places. They'd be under the ladder. They'd be inside the building somewhere getting warm and--which was strictly against regulations. And of course, you have to admonish them for this sort of thing, you know. So I knew that once I left, they were going to go back in again. So I would tell them. I'd say, "Look, I'm coming back. I'll be back in--I'll be back in a half an hour. But I want to see you out on the wall. I don't want to see you in the building here." And it worked out fine. Not exactly regulations but (laughs) there again, it was mostly sitting around, going to classes.

SIGRIST: What kind of classes?

ISLEY: Oh, just the usual signal--I was a signalman. We'd go to signaling classes, ship recognition classes, seamanship classes. And in the--there was nothing to do with the ship you were going on, because when we were told we were going aboard a certain ship in each case, the Sheliak or the Breckinridge was to the big transport. We were detached from Ellis Island and sent to Newport, Rhode Island where they had these pre-commissioning details. And we spent a month up there doing that. So I was up there actually two months out of this period of time. But as far as-as what we did here, it was--oh, I know one of the things I did while I was here. Because I was an art student--I went to art school and I always loved sports--they had a newspaper here. It was called the "Log." And you may have seen one. I don't know whether you've seen those things around here or not. I did some of the little sports cartoons for them here. They had a fellow who was a staff--staff artist here and he did a cartoon on a very inept Coast Guardsman who got in all kinds of troubles. But--excuse me. I did--I did little--little boxes of--of Coast Guard drawings for them, a little thing with a fellow--they had a baseball team here and they had a foot--a-a basketball team. And Rabbit Jacobson--I remember the name-

SIGRIST: Rabbit?

ISLEY: Rabbit. They used to call him-

SIGRIST: Rabbit?

ISLEY: Irv-Irv Jacobson and they called him Rabbit. He was a little bit of a guy and he was a chief and he was the head of the sports. He was the sports director. And he got me in with the paper and so I drew these things for him. And what I--do you remember, I mentioned to you that I

was on--out on that walkway, that corridor going from the ferryboat in? There was a little kiosk there where we would sit. And we--we'd pull duties there too, four-hour stretches and you'd check their I.D.s as these guys come in and so on and so forth. And that's where I'd do my artwork. (chuckles) I think the statute has passed now. No one would get me for that. But (chuckles) yeah, I--I would sit there and I would draw my cartoons during that period of time. It was from 12 to four, not much going on.

SIGRIST: Now, you said people came in on the ferry-

ISLEY: Yeah-

SIGRIST: and went through a corridor.

ISLEY: Yeah, when you came in off the--came in the ferryboat in the slip there and went to the right. To the left was the-the U.S. hospital where they had all the seamen that were hurt, injured and otherwise incapacitated were kept over there. There's another story about that maybe I can tell you about. But anyway, these people would come in and you'd go to the right and you'd walk around that long corridor. Then you would come into what is the baggage room now.

SIGRIST: Of-of the main building?

ISLEY: Yeah, in the main building. And then that was the main barracks. I know that for a fact. That was the main barracks in there. They had almost three or four tiers of bunks in there.

SIGRIST: Is that where you stayed?

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you--can you describe what it looked like on the inside? You've mentioned the bunks. Anything else? Any other interior details?

ISLEY: Very austere. I mean, just-just strictly bunks in there. And just as far as you could see, bunks. And they were no more than eight feet apart, probably. You know, just as many as you could cram in there. I don't know. There must have been thousands and thousands of Coast Guardsmen that came through here and were stationed here at any given time, because there was always that transition between ships, people coming in here, transferring out of here, back and forth. My recollection was just a big room full of beds.

SIGRIST: Hmm. Were there bathrooms or anything like that attached to that area?

ISLEY: Oh, boy.

SIGRIST: Or do you have any recollections where the showers or bathrooms were?

ISLEY: No, I don't.

SIGRIST: Any stories attached to that particular side of the-

ISLEY: No, not really.

SIGRIST: I'd like to hear the story about the hospital.

ISLEY: Oh, okay. As I mentioned before, walking around on the seawall at night, cause I had to make that whole swing and I had to do it every hour, the seamen that were brought there--these were the merchant seamen who came in. They were either hurt--mostly, they were the seamen who were, well, the Army called them shell shocked. I guess you could say the same thing about the seamen. They'd been through these torpedoings and so on. And I can remember instances of walking by that building and, now, as you can look out and see those huge windows that are out there, all with the grates on them, or grates on the inside, I can remember seeing--I'm not making this up--seeing seamen or men crawling up that screen inside there, like monkeys. And I thought, "Boy, that--what a horrifying sight that is." Yet, being very young, you kind of pass it off and don't--forget about it, but has stuck with me over the years of what these fellows were going through, and whether they knew what they doing or whether it was just a matter of being completely out of their mind.

SIGRIST: Did you have any occasion to go into the hospitals for any reason?

ISLEY: No, we're--we're not allowed in the hospital.

SIGRIST: Not allowed.

ISLEY: We're not allowed. That was strictly off limits.

SIGRIST: Where else were you not allowed to go?

ISLEY: Actually, it didn't matter. I mean, whether we were allowed to go--is where you wanted to go. I d--I don't recall any restrictions other than the hospital. That side of the island was off limits, except walking the seawall. And we were not allowed in the building when we came. And

that's where I'd find some of these guys were hiding, and I mentioned before in that building there. And, you know-

SIGRIST: Bob, we're going to stop just for a moment and Kevin's going to flip the tapes over-

ISLEY: All right.

SIGRIST: And then we'll continue talking about this.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

SIGRIST: All right. We're now beginning side two of the interview with Bob Isley, who was here in the Coast Guard. Bob, I'd like you to talk a little bit about--you mentioned you were going to a class, signal--signalman's class?

ISLEY: Well, there were signaling classes-

SIGRIST: What-

ISLEY: Seamanship class.

SIGRIST: What is signaling? Tell me what that is and-

ISLEY: Signaling is--in a word, it's communications. And aboard a ship we have three types of communications. We have a signal light, a blinker light, which uses the Morse code. There is the semaphore, using the two--old-timers call it wigwag. You know, that sort of thing.

SIGRIST: You're gesturing with flags here.

ISLEY: Gesturing with flags, right. And of course, the other was the yardarm pennants, which are used to convey signals also. You have the flag box with flags representing the alphabets. And the Coast--or the Navy has all specialized type of pennants and so on, which all-all have different meanings to them. And so you have a vast--you have a great way to communicate between ships. At sea, during the war especially, you couldn't signal at night, only under emergency conditions. And then you had a light, which had a red filter on it, which was very hard to see. And it's more of a directional light than a bright, white light. During the daytime we would use the pennants to put messages back and forth.

SIGRIST: In what way would they teach you these things? Can you--can you talk a little bit about the class, the classroom, how the class was structured? Things that stick out in your mind, if anything, about that experience.

ISLEY: Well, sig--in my case, signaling, I--I--when I was on a buoy tender, I became what is known as a signalman striker. You know, I was a seaman. I wasn't rated. And I learned--what I basically learned, I picked up myself. I never went to signal school. I learned the flags. I learned the Morse code. I learned the semaphore. And-

SIGRIST: What about here, though? What-

ISLEY: On Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ISLEY: It was more refreshing cour--refresher courses of-of just what do you know? And how much do you still know from what you learned?

SIGRIST: And did you have to put that in practice any way while you were here?

ISLEY: Out here, no.

SIGRIST: No.

ISLEY: No.

SIGRIST: So you weren't doing semaphore out on the seawall or anything like that? (chuckles)

ISLEY: No, no. No, although they gave me a 45 and said, "Walk the seawall." (chuckles)

SIGRIST: Anything else stick out in your mind about any kind of instruction that you might have received here?

ISLEY: Mmm--Paul, I can't--I can't think of anything particularly that they had, because they--I mean, being--being a signalman, that's what I was going to be. And they wouldn't try to change it unless I requested it. And I didn't do that. I don't know. I--I can't recall any particular-

SIGRIST: No--no other sorts of-of instruction that were off-

ISLEY: As I said earlier, I think boredom was the biggest thing that was here. Trying to find something that--keep your time going. And when I had the-

-when I did the artwork, I mean that was something I could do to help wile the hours away.

SIGRIST: Well, and this is sort of related to that. You mentioned earlier that sports played a-a part here, probably to relieve boredom also. Can you talk a little bit about that side of-of Ellis Island and the Coast Guard, what kinds of sports and-

ISLEY: Well, they-they--I-I didn't participate in the sports here. This was for the permanent personnel. They had a baseball team and they played--oh, I remember the baseball team when I played, teams like Army. They played Princeton. The basketball team, same thing. They went out and played various college teams at that time.

SIGRIST: Was any of this played here that you know of?

ISLEY: No. No, there was no facilities that I recall here. I could be wrong but I don't remember there being any gymnasium, particularly. Oh, there must have been though if they had practices.

SIGRIST: Or outdoor-

ISLEY: Yeah, or something. Yeah, there must have been something here like that.

SIGRIST: But you said you did not participate in that at all.

ISLEY: I didn't participate, no.

SIGRIST: What were ways that you found for recreation?

ISLEY: Liberty. (laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you talk about that?

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What process did you have to go-

ISLEY: We had--we had--we had quite liberal liberty, if I can use that phrase. When we weren't doing anything here, we were off for--oh, 48-hour leaves were commonplace. And that was handy because, you know, I'd just met my wife and this was great. I could spend some time there and (chuckles) she lived up in Spring Valley, so-

SIGRIST: What kinds of things would you do with your wife if you got 48-hour leave? What--because that's not a lot of time.

ISLEY: No. Oh, generally just--she lived with an aunt. She's--my wife's an orphan. She lived with her aunt and we'd go up there. We'd do a lot of walking, hiking. At that time, Spring Valley, New York was very rural. And-

SIGRIST: Were you married yet?

ISLEY: I was married in October of forty-four. Yeah, forty-four.

SIGRIST: forty-four. So you were married.

ISLEY: October of forty-four.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ISLEY: Yeah. I shouldn't have hesitated on that, should I? (laughter)

SIGRIST: Well, while--

ISLEY: October of '44, yeah. (laughs)

SIGRIST: While we're talking about your wife, Jean, you met her during the 30-day-

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was the name of that leave again? I forgot.

ISLEY: Survivor leave.

SIGRIST: Survivor leave.

ISLEY: Survivor leave.

SIGRIST: Love that name.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you met her.

ISLEY: Well, my mother was a--worked at a hotel in Ocean Grove, New Jersey. And so when I came off, I--going to have something to do. So I was--would go down to Ocean Grove. And apparently--the story my wife tells is that my mother went to her aunt and said that her son is on--coming

down here and could her daughter escort me around and (chuckles) be a companion? Well, yeah, I guess that worked out. (laughs)

SIGRIST: Her first name is Jean.

ISLEY: Jean.

SIGRIST: What is her maiden name?

ISLEY: Rowan.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it?

ISLEY: R-O-W-A-N.

SIGRIST: Great.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And was Jean--after you were married, when you were here at Ellis Island, was she ever allowed on to the island for any reason?

ISLEY: No. No, the only time that she was allowed on a Naval facility was when we commissioned the Breckinridge. Then they had open house, which was quite extensive. And she was--a card came to her and she was invited aboard.

SIGRIST: Do you ever remember visitors coming onto the island for any reason?

ISLEY: Oh, yeah. Yeah, one--yeah, Jimmy Durante visited here one time. A lot of notables came aboard. Sports figures came aboard and don't ask me to name them because I-I don't remember. But there were people that came aboard, yes.

SIGRIST: I wonder why Jimmy Durante sticks out in your mind.

ISLEY: I don't know.

SIGRIST: (laughs)

ISLEY: You know, if--I have a picture home of one of the "Logs". And in it, Jimmy Durante is in it. And there was a fellow here, Gil--oh, nuts. I can't think of his name. He's Italian fellow but he had a large nose also. And the two of them were nose to nose (laughter) in the picture there, and that was a-a very famous picture that they took aboard here.

SIGRIST: (chuckles) Do you remember any of the other people that you were stationed here with? Other Coast Guardsmen or officers or any--anyone that sticks out in your mind for any reason?

ISLEY: Just-

SIGRIST: You mentioned the little guy-

ISLEY: Oh, Rabbit Jacobson.

SIGRIST: Rabbit, yes.

ISLEY: Yeah, the chief. The chief. He was the chief athletic specialist or something (chuckles) like that.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ISLEY: I do remember that the-the fellows that came off ships, they held the permanent detail here somewhat disdainfully because they were shore duty personnel. And as you go on, you realize this isn't fair but were young, very impressionable. And we always think, "Well, you guys are shore duty. We've been out on the ocean. We were back and forth. We've been torpedoed. We've been shot at." And so on and so forth. But they were all good guys and we all got to know them pretty well. You get to know certain people pretty good, the tailor, because you want your [unclear] fresh. You know, you take it in and you hope that he'll give you a little--instead a getting it in a week, you get in two days or something like that. (chuckles) But it wasn't--it wasn't a place where you got to meet too many people. You knew the guys that were going to be on the ship. I had a very good friend of mine that was on the Menges with me and he was here also. And-

SIGRIST: Can you spell Menges, please?

ISLEY: Menges was the DE that I was on.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it?

ISLEY: M-E-N-G-E-S.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

ISLEY: It was a destroyer escort. It was the DE-320. And-

SIGRIST: And so this gentleman was here at Ellis with you also?

ISLEY: Yeah, he was the quartermaster. And he was the one I told you about that ran out from the fly bridge to see if I was still around after--where the torpedo (chuckles) went and what happened, whether I'd been blown off the ship.

SIGRIST: Did-did you and this gentleman share any kind of experience while you were here? Something that you guys did together or-

ISLEY: Well, we'd go on liberty together a lot. Jimmy was from Georgia and-and we-we met aboard the--aboard the Menges and he was probably my closest friend. And we carried on a relationship even after the war. When he moved up to Boston, we'd go up and visit them there.

SIGRIST: Do you have a story or a recollection of something happening to one of your fellow Coast Guardsmen who may have gotten into trouble in some way?

ISLEY: What kind of trouble?

SIGRIST: Disciplinary. (laughs) Trouble that would have-

ISLEY: Oh, gosh. (laughter) Every day. (laughs)

SIGRIST: I'm wondering what kinds of activities would have gotten-

ISLEY: Well-

SIGRIST: people into trouble.

ISLEY: Well-

SIGRIST: And what was the punishment?

ISLEY: One-one comes to mind right off the bat was on the buoy tender when I first went aboard there.

SIGRIST: Here at Ellis Island.

ISLEY: Oh, here at Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ISLEY: Oh, okay. Now-

SIGRIST: I'm sure it happened (chuckles) on the boats all the time.

ISLEY: Oh, yeah. Going over the bow on liberty and things like that. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah, that's right.

ISLEY: No, I really can't. I really can't think of any--the ones mostly that I wasn't privy to things that went wrong. I saw what happened to them afterwards. I say--had some of the guard duty down below in the brig.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about that?

ISLEY: Not too much to mention. We would--we'd take a four-hour stint. And it was--basically, it was just to hold their hand while they went to the men's room that sort of thing, and make sure that everything was all right down there. There was-

SIGRIST: Where was the brig?

ISLEY: The brig was down below. Don't ask me where.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what it looked like?

ISLEY: Oh, boy. It was just like a great big cellar with all kinds of boxes and things around, and in the middle of this thing was this--this area with bars in it, (chuckles) which we put them in. It wasn't anything special at all.

SIGRIST: Was--was this duty that everybody--this guard duty down there, did-

ISLEY: Yeah-

SIGRIST: Everyone have to perform this at one time-

ISLEY: Petty officers, yeah.

SIGRIST: Petty officers [not understood].

ISLEY: Petty officers. Yeah, the--seamen, themselves, didn't perform any of that type of duty. They were the poor guys that walked the seawall or--the menial jobs. Worked on--worked on the galley. K-P, that sort of thing.

SIGRIST: Yeah, I haven't asked you about that, actually. What do you remember about food and-

ISLEY: The food here-

SIGRIST: Eating food and-

ISLEY: I thought the food was great while we were here. I've never--matter of fact, when I've come here--we've come here a number of times, my wife and I, and I-I can--the barracks, I can visualize. But I cannot visualize where the dining hall was. I cannot--I seem to think it was that room in the back behind the baggage room. But I-I don't know. But I remember the food was good. I remember one time I went back for seconds on cake and I was ostracized by the chef. He says, "You're going to get fat eating that stuff." He said, "You don't need that stuff." You know. (chuckles) It was good. (laughter)

SIGRIST: Did you eat anything that you'd never eaten before here?

ISLEY: On the island or in general? (laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, on--you know, anything that was new to you in-in the way of food here?

ISLEY: Oh, no. I don't think so.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ISLEY: The only--the only thing that I can think I'd never ate before was on the buoy tender, and the ham hocks and black-eyed peas. (chuckles) You know, but that had nothing to do with Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: That's pretty exotic from someone who came from New Jersey.

ISLEY: Yeah, right. (laughs) Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you ever have an occasion to go to the Statue of Liberty while you were here at Ellis Island-

ISLEY: No-

SIGRIST: For any reason?

ISLEY: First time I ever visited the island, the statue, was after I got out of the service and I was married, believe it or not. We took the kids over. We--on their seventh birthday that was tradition. We'd take the boys over and we'd climb to the top.

SIGRIST: Do you--do you remember any kind of--let's see. You were here--you would have gone through a Christmas here.

ISLEY: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Christmas of forty-four.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollection of anything being done for the-the Coast Guardsmen at Christmas time or Thanksgiving or any holiday, actually?

ISLEY: No specific recollection. I'm sure they had special meals. I might have even had leave over Christmas. Who knows? Because one thing to remember is that we that were here awaiting other ships, we were just kind of loose ends. And so, if-if we wanted liberty, we could have it unless we had one of the--one of the duties that were on board here, because there was nothing-nothing for us to do here. And-and-and what you asked there, I think we spent more time off the island doing things than we did on the island. But as far as Christmas goes, I don't recall.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to go into New York City for any reason?

ISLEY: Oh, yes. Yes. Oh, sure. Yeah, because that's where the ferryboat went, for one thing. (chuckles) Went into New York and then-

SIGRIST: What would you like to do if you had a chance to go into New York?

ISLEY: What I liked to do?

SIGRIST: Yes, what-what-what were some of the things that you enjoyed doing when you went into New York on liberty?

ISLEY: Well, at that time, get in and get out again because my interest lied outside of New York. We used to go to Radio City a lot on-on liberty because there were some times we'd--she had just had an overnighiter. Liberty. Go-go to Radio City a lot. I wasn't much of a boozier at the time, so I didn't do much of that. In fact, I didn't have my first beer till I got in the service. (laughs) And-

SIGRIST: So innocent entertainment.

ISLEY: Yeah, innocent entertainment.

SIGRIST: (chuckles) Uh-huh.

ISLEY: Th-that's a good way to put it. Let's leave it at that. (laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you or any of your fellow Coast Guardsmen have anything to do with the immigration side of what was going on at Ellis Island at that time?

ISLEY: No, not at all.

SIGRIST: Nothing? Do-do you have any recollection of seeing, perhaps, detainees in the 1940s?

ISLEY: No, because--did they have--did they have immigration here during the Coast Guard period?

SIGRIST: There were people who were detained here-

ISLEY: Oh, there were?-

SIGRIST: For problems.

ISLEY: Well, that--you see, now that's the first I've heard of that. (chuckles)

SIGRIST: Yeah. Well--and I'm wondering if you, perhaps, saw any of these people?

ISLEY: No, no. Not a bit. No. The only outsiders I was aware of was, of course, I mentioned before, was the seamen, the-the hospital. Public health hospital.

SIGRIST: Right. All right. So you left Ellis Island once. Right? You went onto the Menges? Was that-

ISLEY: No, no, no. I left-left Ellis Island and went to pre-commissioning duty for the Sheliak, came back from that and was then taken off the Sheliak and they said it was going to be assigned to the Breckinridge, which was a big, six-hundred foot troop transport. And then I spent more time here waiting for the Breckinridge. And in June of 1945 we were put aboard the Breckinridge and we made a couple of trips over to France bringing troops back, reassigning troops over there. One-one of--one of the bunch we brought back was General--not Patton. Who was the other tank commander? Do you re--wouldn't remember. I don't-

SIGRIST: [not understood]?

ISLEY: I shouldn't have started this off because I can't remember it now.

SIGRIST: (laughs)

ISLEY: But anyhow, this was some big guy that was running tanks around France during the war. We brought his group back too.

SIGRIST: Huh? And--and never to go back to Ellis Island? Right? After that?

ISLEY: Never to go back to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Never-

ISLEY: No.

SIGRIST: Well, before we leave Ellis Island, is there anything else about that experience that we haven't talked about that-that-that sticks out in your mind?

ISLEY: I-I don't--I can't really think of anything special because everything is--again, I blame it on my memory at this stage. (chuckles) But-

SIGRIST: Well, and you say it was boring so, I mean, there may not have been a lot there.

ISLEY: It was. It was extremely boring. It was extremely boring because they didn't have things for us to do. You know, we were--we were just here waiting and the-the-you got the feeling that if they could get you off here sooner, they would. And, being wartime, they probably would. But these were ships that we waiting for. They were either under construction, you know, or new ships. They weren't ones-ones that were already on duty, were already manned. And you had one or two people that would come in. For example, there was the signalman who was going to go to the Campbell, which was another Coast Guard cutter. And I had heard that I was assigned to go to the Campbell. And at the last minute, somebody else was put on the Campbell. So I-I missed that one too. And it was--but those were rare. Mostly, it was lump-sum movements of-of people going on different ships, new ships that were coming out. Because at the end of the war there were many, many more ships being put into service and some that never even saw-saw service during the war.

SIGRIST: Well, in our remaining few minutes, why don't you kind of give me a summary of the rest of your life?

ISLEY: The rest of my life? Well, we got out of the service and I went to art school.

SIGRIST: Did you get out of the serv--did--were you there for the duration of the war?

ISLEY: I got out in--yeah, October of '45 and came home, went to art school, New York, spent two and a half years there. I got a job with the Elizabeth newspaper as an editorial in a newspaper--a sports cartoonist.

SIGRIST: Elizabeth, New Jersey.

ISLEY: "Elizabeth Daily Journal" and was there for some 27 years. The paper went belly up and so I was out of work for a couple of years. And then I went to work for the Department of the Army up at Picatinny Arsenal in their graphics.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Picatinny?

ISLEY: P-I-C-A-T-I-N-N-Y.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

ISLEY: And I was up there for 14 years and then I retired in 1992 from that.

SIGRIST: Did you and Jean have children?

ISLEY: We have three children. We have two boys and a girl.

SIGRIST: Can you name them?

ISLEY: One is Alan A-L-A-N, and Wayne and Martha. And they're both doing very well. (chuckles) Thank you. I have four grandchildren and they're doing very well. One is a chef. The one-one of the most successful of the grandchildren is the chef up in Boston. He went to chef school, became a chef up there. Scottie is in the Air Force. The two girls, well, they're wending their way. One is married. Jenny's married. And Abigail just turned 21 and she's still on her own.

SIGRIST: Well, they're young.

ISLEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: (chuckles) Well, tell me. When you look back on your Coast Guard experience from this position in your life, how do you look at that time in your life?

ISLEY: A growing-up time. I think from the time, you know, being under Mother's thumb all the time and getting away, I learned a lot about how to be self-dependent. And I think that when I came out of the Coast Guard, I think I was well enough along so that I could handle my own self, handle my life. I couldn't have done it four years earlier. I wasn't mature enough. But I felt now that when I--what I had been through, and if you've been through something like--not just myself but the whole ship had been through that experience--you grow up pretty fast. And I-I think probably it did me a world of good.

SIGRIST: That's great.

ISLEY: (chuckles)

SIGRIST: That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we end?

ISLEY: No, I don't think so. I-I think you (chuckles)--you have all the questions. I (chuckles)-

SIGRIST: Did we cover everything?

ISLEY: Well, I think you covered pretty much everything right from-from the beginning to the end. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, Bob, I want to thank you very much for coming over here and letting me interview you. And we are very lucky that-that Art, our former-

ISLEY: Yeah. Well, Art and I are very good friends.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ISLEY: I've known Art for five years. I met him at the park.

SIGRIST: I should say that Art was a volunteer with us for quite a long time doing photography with Kevin till he recently moved to Texas.

ISLEY: Yeah, he just-

SIGRIST: I think he's moved.

ISLEY: This last week or the week--yeah.

SIGRIST: Very recently, he did.

ISLEY: [not understood], yeah. I saw Art just before he left and, well, and he's the one that, when he called me in the morning and he said [chuckles], "Paul wants to talk to you."

SIGRIST: That's right. (chuckles)

ISLEY: "What does he want to talk to me about?" (laughter)

EI-1025/ISLEY

SIGRIST: Well, great. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Bob Isley on Monday, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1998, with Kevin Daley running the equipment. Thank you very much.

ISLEY: (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW