

EI-1041

ALFRED ROHR

BIRTHDATE: JULY 9, 1920

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

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COAST GUARD, ELLIS ISLAND

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is March 12th, 1999. I'm in Homosassa, Florida with Mr. Alfred Rohr, who was in the Coast Guard—Guards, stationed at Ellis Island for about a month starting on May 1st, 1943. And with us is—is Mrs. Rohr, Muriel Rohr and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.

Well, I think your story is unusual and dramatic and heroic, so I'm really happy to be here, and I hope that you can fill in some of the details. We'll also have on file your letters, one to the Superintendent, Diane Dayson [PH], and one to me that explain in some detail about the incident that happened on April 24th, 1943 in the New York Harbor. And—but anyway, to have it in your voice and—and I know you're not a big talker, but I'm sure this will be wonderful.

Okay, let's start at the beginning. If you would give your birth date and where you were born.

ROHR: July 9th, 1920, and born in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Okay, and how old were you when you joined up with the Coast Guard?

ROHR: I guess I was twenty. Nine—I guess I was twenty years old.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: Nineteen or twenty.

LEVINE: And what—what happened—what was it that instigated your—your joining up?

ROHR: I always liked the Coast Guard and I had heard a lot about it and I decided that that was the outfit I'd like to be in.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: And—

LEVINE: Was it because you were in Brooklyn that you heard so much about it or—

ROHR: No, we were not far too from Floyd Bennett Field and you used to see the Coast Guard operating out there, and they had their—their seaplane to do rescue work out there, and I enjoyed watching them. That's—that was my first—my first impression of them.

LEVINE: I see. So where did you actually go to sign up?

ROHR: I signed up down in Battery, Number One Battery Place and the arm—the army took it over and then the Coast Guard also was in there, and that's where we signed up and had our physical there.

LEVINE: Now, did you go by yourself or were there friends of yours who also were interested in joining the Coast Guard?

ROHR: No, ma'am, I went by myself. I was all alone. You know, I took the subway to New York and went down there and signed up.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, just for a little bit of background, what was your father's name?

ROHR: My father's name was Herman Rohr, H-E-R-M-A-N, R-O-H-R, and he came over to this country when he was sixteen years old and it was 1912. He was going to come over on one of the big ships and when he saw the Titanic sank in 1912, he was kind of afraid. He didn't want to take a chance that it would sink, so his father had known somebody in the Merchant Marine over there and they said, "Go with the George Washington. That's—that's a good ship." So that's—that's what he did.

LEVINE: And why don't you mention about the George Washington, what you were saying earlier before we put on the tape?

ROHR: Well, it never crossed my mind that that was the only ship that was named—a German ship that was named after—after an American person or President or so-forth, and I imagine his father thought it was a safe bet. You know, that they wouldn't—wouldn't do any damage to the ship if there was a war or so, which they expected to be very soon.

LEVINE: In 1912 they were expecting it.

ROHR: In 1912.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: Right. So—

LEVINE: So he came over on the George Washington and where did he—where did he land and—

ROHR: They land on Pier—I think it was Pier 56, where most of them still—well, they don't any more, but they used to land there in New York on the West Side, and he—they had a—he had an uncle over here. I'm not too sure if it was a real uncle or if they just called him an uncle, but he—he went to meet my father and that's why he didn't have to go to Ellis Island because in those days, if you didn't have somebody to vouch for you or so-forth, so that you had work, you could—had to go to Ellis Island to be inspected physically and so-forth.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. I want—he could have traveled second class or first class, in which case he wouldn't have gone either.

ROHR: Right, right. He went with four other German boys that were in the same cabin. They had a cabin, they joined up. I imagine it was third class that he came on.

LEVINE: Right. Uh-huh.

ROHR: So, and he wasn't in steerage, which was the worst.

LEVINE: Right. Now, did—so he really didn't—whether the uncle was a true uncle or not, but he didn't have other direct family members.

ROHR: Relatives? No, he didn't have any relatives here at all. No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and why did he decide to come?

ROHR: Well, they knew over there that there was going to be a war and my father, being sixteen years old, was ready to go into the war. They wouldn't accept, you know, a no answer. They would just take you and that was it, and he didn't want to go into the war there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: So he came to this country and he made a success of it, and—like most of them did. They were hard-working people and sixteen hour day was nothing.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What did he do when he got here?

ROHR: He worked in the confectionary business. He liked—because it was over in Germany they had nothing like this, you know, pleasures or anything like that. Ice cream or candy or something like that. So he decided to go into that line because he—he enjoyed it and in later years he was a very competent person in making candy, all kinds of lemon toys and so-forth, and he had a lot of fun doing it.

LEVINE: Great. What part of Germany was—was he from?

ROHR: In—he came in from Sunstadt [PH] and that's near—near Bremmerhaven. It's about twenty or thirty miles from Bremmerhaven. [PH]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how about your mother? Where was she from?

ROHR: Well, she was born in this country, my mother, and they—they used to belong to the Plodeutscher [PH] Volksfest, which is an organization of German people in this country that liked to get together and so-forth, but they spoke Plodeutsch, which is different than what the German language would be. It's a—it's a slang off-shoot of it, and he spoke it very well.

LEVINE: And your mother spoke it, too?

ROHR: Yes, ma'am, she could understand it. She could understand and naturally he'd talk more Plodeutsch, so she learned to speak more Plodeutsch.

LEVINE: And what was the name of the society where they—

ROHR: Plodeutscher Volksfest. They were in Franklin Square, Long Island, and they had—it was a home, also, for old—elderly people.

LEVINE: Wow. Is it still there, do you think?

ROHR: Oh, yes. Yes, ma'am, it's still there.

LEVINE: Yeah? Wow?

ROHR: And it's a terrific place to—to visit.

LEVINE: Great. Well, I'd like to visit. I may find some Ellis Island immigrants in it.

ROHR: Could be. Could be, yeah. You could more than likely find half the population there. [Laughs]

LEVINE: I see. So—so actually your whole—your whole background—and what was your mother's name?

ROHR: Frieda.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

ROHR: Gathmann. [PH]Frieda Gathmann.

LEVINE: G-A-T-H?

ROHR: G-A-T-H-M-A-N-N. Two N's. The Germans always had to go further with their letters and whatnot. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay. So were you an only child or did you have brothers and sisters?

ROHR: Had two sisters and—

LEVINE: Younger or older?

ROHR: Both—one younger and one older than I was, and one is still living in New York, Long Island.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when—what was the date that you signed up for the Coast Guard?

ROHR: 1942, and I think it was April. For some reason April is always in—in the records. April. I think April something. I have it on my discharge.

LEVINE: Well, you had been in about a year at the time of the near explosion.

ROHR: Yes, ma'am. I had been in about a year. We had—also had been down to Paris Island at the Marine Base for instructions and so-forth, and—

LEVINE: Yeah, why don't you tell—after you signed up what—what course did your Coast Guard career take in the very beginning?

ROHR: Okay. Let's see. First we went to Manhattan Beach, which was early in the conflict. They—they had these bungalow type homes, which was owned by a lot of people and the government just took over the beach, the whole—the whole place and they paid them for it and we had to go there. We were just trainees, so we had to take the furniture and put it out on trucks and so-forth, and that was where we were going to live.

LEVINE: This is in New Jersey, Manhattan Beach?

ROHR: No, this—yeah, this was in—in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Oh, in Brooklyn, sorry.

ROHR: By Sheepshead Bay. Near Sheepshead Bay. And in fact, next to Manhattan Beach was the Merchant Marine barracks where they had the—that came on later during the war. They built up a building for the Merchant Marine training center. So—

LEVINE: What was the connect—was there much connection between the Merchant Marines and the Coast Guard?

ROHR: No, ma'am. They never grouped together or had any kind of doing work together or so-forth. No, it wasn't.

LEVINE: No. Okay, so you went to Manhattan Beach.

ROHR: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then what?

ROHR: From Manhattan Beach we—we were only there for about a week or so, maybe two weeks tops and from there they had some kind of a—how would you call it? A shindig where they picked all the good guys or the bad guys or whatever and they said, "You fellows in this line here, you're going so and so," and so-forth. And we were picked to go into the Marine Corps down in Paris Island, but we didn't know this at the time. We—we just shipped off and we arrived at the Marine barracks, and then you line up there and they'd tell you what barracks you're going to sleep in and so-forth. And when we were there, we learned how to put out fires, how to do drill work, how to use machine guns, how to do this

and all kinds of armament work, you know. And we were there for three months and with no liberty. My girlfriend wrote letters and said, "Well, I hope when you have liberty you have some fun when you go out and so-forth," and I was thinking to myself at that time, "There is no liberty for three months." [Laughs]

LEVINE: What did you think after you'd been in the Coast Guard for three months?

ROHR: Well, I didn't even know what service I was in. They—of course, toward the end we realized that the Marines eventually were going to use these—these invasion barges. That's the only way you could get into these foreign countries and whatever, to—to free them. So that's what we were delegated to do then, you know, to show them how to—how to land on so-forth, and that's about the story I'm at.

LEVINE: Hmm. So then after three months on Paris Island?

ROHR: Then we came back to—to New York. There was about I'd say fifty of us or maybe seventy-five or a hundred. I never counted them, and we went to Seamen House. Not the Seamen House down—down on the Battery Place, but the Seamen House on 20th Street and 12th Avenue. There's about a five-story building or four-story building and they would take the—the seamen from the ships, you know, and they had a place to sleep and so-forth until the ship went out again. So the Coast Guard took that over and we had, you know, rooms and so-forth there and we slept and then we were detailed to go into—to Caven [PH] Point and we didn't even know what it was, Caven Point, until the first day we got there and we see these ships there and there was three ships on one side of the pier and three ships on the other side of the pier. And it was about—about a mile from the Statue of Liberty and it was almost a quarter of a mile long, the pier, and it was quite an—quite an operation there. They really had it down pat. They had room on the—on the pier for two—two trains on both sides of the pier, and then they built a platform from where the—where the trains were when they'd pull up to the ship and the platform they would take and take the bombs and so-forth that were on the train and move it to the—to the—to the pier, you know, to be even with the door of the train. So then we sort of knew what it was. We were there to load ammunition on the ships.

LEVINE: That was the first time you realized what—

ROHR: Oh. [papers rustling] We were considered pier guards, that's about it, you know, and we had instructions on what—what to do with the—with the longshoremen and so-forth, you know. Not to let them smoke and all that that they were—you know, not to be doping off or handling things

carefully. That was a very dangerous job. We understood that because one little thing and—one thing I didn't like, after we were there, they had the—the army had also a little barracks at the end of the pier and that's where they slept and they had a twenty—forty millimeter canon there as an anti aircraft for protection. I mean, I never understood that because if it got that bad, you know, we wouldn't have to worry about shooting them down. They would be shooting us. But the—I wanted to say is the—oh, the pier guards they had were, we used to call them 'keystone' police. They were civilian—not civilian police, but they were an organization, private organization, I suspect, that guarded the entrance to the pier and the—they carried forty-five caliber pistols. Now, that was used—they used them during the Mexican rebellion or the—all kinds of wars that the country had used preceding and they were old type pistols with long barrels. And those things, you know, they were very powerful. We weren't allowed to carry any guns or anything like that because, you know, anybody would use a pistol there would be crazy. But they had them and they'd come up information, they wanted to find out or tell us something, they'd come up the pier, you know, and I always thought, "That's stupid to have these guys running around like that," you know. Nobody had arms. Even, in fact, the army fellows would patrol the pier and they'd have bayonets, but no—no ammunition in the rifles or anything like that, you know.

LEVINE: Because you were dealing with ammunition.

ROHR: Right, of course. One shot in there and that would be it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: So—but those fellows got away with it, and they never stopped it. I never understood that, but that was the flaw and so—but other than that, everything went smooth in the end. They had very good—good training. I mean, with the stevedores you can't anything very—anything disrespectful. Those fellows really knew what they were doing and they did a very good job and—

LEVINE: Now, were they—were they service connected in any way?

ROHR: No, ma'am. They—they were civilian. They were in the stevedore, you know, merchant marine or whatever that is there. I don't know the connection there it would be, but I think it was just they had a list of stevedores and that was they had them from eternity and they were stevedores and that was it. They had like a union.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROHR: And to be a stevedore, you had to be pretty good. They actually had a school on that, the stevedore organization. Sure.

LEVINE: Right. Now, so how—just roughly, how many stevedores were—were loading ammunition, like when you would go there to patrol it?

ROHR: Well, I guess for the whole ship I guess there'd maybe be twenty-five, twenty-five men because they had to handle all the booms and everything like that. I mean a quick guess would be at least twenty-five men to a ship because, you know, there was a lot of work to be done and handling that stuff was heavy.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and how many of you were there? How many—

ROHR: Well, I made an error in my report that I said four men to a ship because I figured there were four holds, but we never had that many men on the pier. I'd say there were about two men to a ship. We'd be relieved once in a while if we asked, but other than that, a couple extra men would roam around from each ship, you know, and they would relieve us then. But, no, there were only two. Two fellows to a ship, I'd say would be a truthful answer.

LEVINE: Oh, so you really must have been pretty busy, I mean keeping track of twenty-people loading a—

ROHR: Oh, yeah. No, we didn't—we didn't roam around the ship. I mean, we watched and, you know, went from one hold to another and climbed the ladders and so-forth to get into the hold.

LEVINE: Were there many incidents during that time when you were patrolling the loading?

ROHR: No, ma'am, there were no incidents with the stevedores ever. I never saw a fight with them or any—they were always—you'd ask them a question and they would do it or you'd tell them to do something, they would do it. There was no problem whatsoever. None whatsoever.

LEVINE: And as a group were they—did they tend to be immigrants? Did they tend to—I mean was there anything that, you know, you could say as a—as a group defined the stevedores?

ROHR: Well, they might have come over into this country. I mean they didn't—they weren't very—they weren't college graduates, if that's what you mean.

LEVINE: No.

ROHR: They weren't college graduates, but they were real hard-working, down to earth people and a lot of them had—were Italian decent. You know, they had the—but they were husky guys and would work until they dropped, you might say, you know.

LEVINE: Well, it's nice that you respected them [unclear].

ROHR: Oh, yeah, we really did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: And even in the Pacific there, they did a wonderful job. But there, they were in the army and they had joined the service and the army had gotten these fellows together as—as a group and decide these fellows are stevedores and they were named. They were the stevedores. When you hit a port, they'd come aboard and there was always a couple of these guys, you know, in each port we hit. Or else we'd take them from our ship and take them to where they were going, where we were going.

LEVINE: Huh. [clock chimes] Okay, so—so you were going from—from New York through the Holland Tunnel to Caven Point to do this patrol.

ROHR: Right.

LEVINE: And then you were moved?

ROHR: Yeah, then—then they decided it took too long to get to Caven Point, so they cut it out and we went to—[microphone drops?]

LEVINE: Okay, let me just—oh, this is good. I thought maybe you were stepping on it. Okay.

ROHR: And—and they found a place, a field over in [unclear] it was Jersey city because that was a stop, Jersey City, yeah. And we moved from there. They moved us to Jersey City and they had the barracks, the wooden army barracks and then we went—from there we went, instead of coming from New York, we went to—from Jersey City to Caven Point, which shortened the route about maybe twenty minutes to half an hour. So it would only take maybe twenty-five minutes to get to Caven Point from there.

LEVINE: And were you working a regular day shift?

ROHR: Yes, ma'am. We—on our group we had the four to twelve shift and I had that shift from the beginning to the end.

LEVINE: Four in the afternoon?

ROHR: Yes, ma'am. Four in the afternoon until—

LEVINE: Midnight.

ROHR: Twelve. Twelve midnight and—

LEVINE: And there were other people on the other ships?

ROHR: Oh, yeah. There were other people on—on—with each shift that there was and they—they loaded those ships day and night. There was no stopping. And holidays and there was no such thing as a day off or anything like that. I mean those ships worked from—from morning 'til night and they had lights on there, which they dimmed after awhile because the complaints were from ships that they could see the lights and so-forth. Even the Statue of Liberty had to put the light out. So.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, how did you feel? I mean did you feel you were doing really important work for the country?

ROHR: Well, I didn't—I didn't like the job, to tell the honest truth.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: I wasn't enthusiastic because it was a dead end job. I mean you couldn't—from what you did there, you couldn't go to the Academy. I mean you weren't in a school. This is a dead end job, but we figured we were doing a job for the war effort, which is what we wanted. So.

LEVINE: Yeah, and what was it like for you, a young man from Brooklyn being in the service? Were you with Coast Guard people from all over the country or mostly—

ROHR: Oh, yes, ma'am.

LEVINE: From New York or—

ROHR: Yeah, we—we had the Coast Guard from all over. From—a lot from south, from New Orleans and so-forth and from North Carolina, South Carolina. I made a--made a lot of good friends in that, but most of them wanted to go into the sea. You know, they were—they actually liked the water and so-forth.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. So—so then was it when you were stationed in Bayonne—wait a minute, Bayonne or Jersey City?

ROHR: Jersey City.

LEVINE: Jersey City. When you were stationed in Jersey City is that when—was that on April 24th, 1943 where you were stationed?

ROHR: Yes, ma'am. When we—one day in—it was the 23rd of April, we had the four to twelve shift and we went from Jersey City to Caven Point and we looked out and we saw smoke coming from about where Caven Point would be. So we talked and I said, "Maybe there's a fire over there." So—but when we got closer we knew there was a fire on one of the ships. So we could see it and it was quite bad. In fact, we didn't even bother going with the truck onto the pier. We just got off the pier—got off the truck. Jumped off at the gate and ran to where the ship was, which was in the middle of the—the three on the right. In other words, the ship, it was three ships there, but the middle one was the one that was on fire. So we—we got our handy billies that we had. We had been trained to use them.

LEVINE: That's—that's a hose? Is that a handy—

ROHR: No, it's like a compressor, about like this.

LEVINE: About three feet long?

ROHR: About four feet and about that—two and a half feet wide, and two men would carry it. One in the front, one in the back and of course we didn't run then, but we walked quick and took it on the ship. Well, they had the—they had these bigger compressors, one for each ship in case of a fire and they had moved two of them from one of the other ships that were there and brought it to this ship and they were using that before we got there to try and put the fire out, but it didn't work. All the news reports said at the time that there was a fire department there, but at the time we were there, we didn't see any fire department.

LEVINE: So who had moved the compressor and who was—who was involved when you got there?

ROHR: Well, they had a—they had a jeep, an army jeep that they used. They clipped them to these big compressors and hauled them around because you could do it with a bunch of men, but there weren't that many men to do it. So they did it that way with the jeep to pull it over, you know. And—

LEVINE: What was the name of the ship that was on fire?

ROHR: The Elestava, E-L-E-S-T-A-V-A, I think, isn't it there?

LEVINE: And—and what were the other two ships? Do you happen to know which other two ships were in there at the time?

ROHR: The names? No, I wouldn't know that. No.

LEVINE: Yeah, but they were equally big and they were being loaded.

ROHR: Yeah, they were three hundred foot.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROHR: They were three hundred foot, at least, yeah, but no liberty ships or victory ships because they hadn't been built yet. These were old type freighters, in other words, that were used as cruise ships, you might say or something like that.

LEVINE: Could you describe the Elestava?

ROHR: Elestavo?

LEVINE: Elestavo.

ROHR: Yeah. Well, she was a one—one funneled ship, one stack and I'd say in length she was at least three hundred and sixty feet. So it was a regular ocean going steamship and some of them had—I'm not sure if this one had it, but some of them had pools, you know, because they were—some were cruise ships and so-forth. And—

LEVINE: And where had it come from?

ROHR: Well, that I wouldn't know, but more than likely she'd be—well, she carried the South American flag. You know, down—the Panamanian flag, actually, with the star in it. [someone sneezes]

?: Sorry. [tape off/on]

ROHR: I think it's red, white and blue with a star.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: And so she caught fire and there was no way you were going to stop that fire because you couldn't get down into the—into the engine room which was where the fire was coming from.

LEVINE: Well, what did you know? Like when you first—did you board the ship right off?

ROHR: As soon as we got there, that's what we did.

LEVINE: And what did you—what could you figure out was happening, in the very beginning?

ROHR: Well, we knew—we knew there was a fire there and it was bad and it had to be put out or else, but there was nobody there from the ship that was a crew member and—and they all had left the ship. So maybe they were on liberty, the crew. I'm not sure. I mean, they most likely just—just—just got away from the ship.

LEVINE: And what about the stevedores, were they around?

ROHR: I didn't see any stevedores there, either. I mean, what would a stevedore be doing? You know, I mean they'd be loading the ship and then there was a fire, so they'd get off. I mean, you know, it's—then let somebody that's in the fire department take over, you know.

[END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1
[BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1

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[THE ABOVE WAS A REPEAT FROM SIDE A]

ROHR: But there was no—there was no fire department there when we went aboard.

LEVINE: So you were just—were you like the only few guys around in the beginning?

ROHR: Just—the only—only guys that were using the hose except the fellows on the compressor, which maybe came from the other ships. You know, the fellows. That I couldn't say, where they came from or whatnot, but there were some fellows there that had the hoses and were trying to put the fire out.

LEVINE: So you're one of the few people on a burning ship that's full of explosives.

ROHR: Yeah. That's--

LEVINE: So what did you decide to do then?

ROHR: Well, there was nothing you could do because there was—other than fight the fire and you couldn't get down to it. So that they—the one in charge, I guess he, from what the report said, was a fellow by the name, he was a Stanley—what was his name? Commander Stanley—

LEVINE: Oh, yes, that's in this stuff.

ROHR: I have his name. But anyway, he—he took over and he—there was a Lackawana [PH] Tugboat passing. That I saw. I saw the tugboat came and I'd stake my life on it. It was a Lackawana tug and I says to myself, "Gee, we could get this ship out of here," you know, and that's what this commander did. He had some kind of contact. I don't know if it was radio or what, with voice or whatever to come over and give us as tow. You know, to get it away from here, and they did. That I saw. I saw they had the [unclear] being brought aboard, you know, that they pull to tie up to the ship and then the tugboat took it out. We had our handy billy going at the time and the hose was dropped over the side so you get the

suction of the water, and we used that to—to cool off the walls, the bulkheads and so-forth to keep the fire contained, so-to-speak, because if it ever happened into the—into the cargo hold, it would be—that would be it. And that's just what we did.

LEVINE: Well, were you—did you stay aboard when it was towed?

ROHR: Oh, yes, ma'am. Our group stayed aboard. We went aboard and there must have been—well, our whole group was there, that I know.

LEVINE: When you say "your whole group," were there more than a few of you?

ROHR: Well, there was—I guess it was anywhere from fifteen to twenty men tops.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and where did the others come from?

ROHR: Well, they said then—because then I went down into the hold, number two hold to keep the—so I could spray the water onto the bulkhead. You know, onto the wall, and it was daylight at the time. When we went aboard it was daylight and so-forth and that's where I—I stayed all that time and I couldn't tell you what happened or anything else, except they said that fire boats came and they must have come because our little amount would never have been sufficient to put the fire out. So what they did was, they just flooded the ship and that's—that's it. I mean with the fire and pressure from the hoses, the water.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. So there—so there were some fire boats from New York City and then there were some Coast Guards that have also—

ROHR: Well, they were Coast Guard fire boats. Little ones. Small. They had these seven—where they used to—I'm not sure what they used to call them, but they were about sixty feet long or fifty foot long. Somewhere around fifty foot and they had a nozzle on there and that would—I mean they had nothing like the New York City Fire Department, the Coast Guard. They had nothing that—that big or that powerful, but they said there were two New York City fire boats come and help to put the fire out because they had no Jersey fire boats. They didn't own their fire boats, so—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember what you were thinking when—while you were fighting that fire?

ROHR: No—I tell you honest truth, after all these years, it's a wonder that we did—that we survived that because it was just luck. I mean if we wouldn't have been able to pull the ship out or that tug hadn't a been

there. They said there were two—two tugs, but I didn't see the other one. There was only one tug that I saw and they pulled us out.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: And when I came up, because the only reason why I came up, after must have been couple hours, was my feet were getting wet and the water from the hose, the water was coming in some place and what I wanted to say is, it was night when I come out of the hold. It was dark. There was no—no light, no nothing and the only reason I came up, because the water had stopped and I wanted to see what was wrong with the pump. The water was up—up to the deck already. So—then I looked around to see if anybody was there and there was nobody there. Not a person.

LEVINE: Oh, my God.

ROHR: And then I really worried because I says, "What happened here that they all left?" You know?

LEVINE: Right.

ROHR: I says, "Nobody told me, you know, that they left or abandoned ship or anything," you know.

LEVINE: So you were the last guy on the ship?

ROHR: I was the last one on that ship and the fire boat came. See, I can't tell. The time when I came up the ladder, it must have been at least fifteen, twenty minutes and a fire boat came. Coast Guard fire boat with the one nozzle and maybe they were there for the whole shebang, I don't know, you know. And they most likely were. They came up to the—to the ship and the bow was almost even to the top so that I didn't even have to jump, you know, like if the ship was in normal position, it would be a jump to get to the smaller boat. And I just walked from the gunnel, the top part of the ship, to the—to the fire boat.

LEVINE: So the ship was really going down by the time you got off.

ROHR: Yeah, it had—it had tilted like this, you know, and the right side, which is the starboard side, would be about like this in the water. You know, like that. So I can remember whoever it was that asked me, he says to me, "You want to stay there all night?" and I says, "No, sir." That's all I said. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Wow.

ROHR: And I didn't know who he was, if he was an apprentice seaman or who he was. As far as I was concerned, he got me off. [someone whispering in background] No. Oh, I wanted to say when we came aboard the ship, they had a boson mate there who says he had a box and each one of us "Take all your identification, your dog tags and your pictures or anything in your wallets, put it all in this box." And then—then I knew what—what was going to be the answer. That they wouldn't see anything of us, but what was in the box was going to be our—our memories.

LEVINE: To identify who was on it, right.

ROHR: So.

LEVINE: What would have happened, had—had that—had that ship blown?

ROHR: If she had blown, well, I'd say there wouldn't be much of a Statue of Liberty left and there would be no Ellis Island. I'm not sure of which wall would have collapsed or which wall would have stood, but it would be pretty flat because with the strength of the explosion. They had block busters on there. On the ship. Most ships did carry them.

LEVINE: What—just say what that is.

ROHR: Well, block busters, they were—they were named because when the Americans would drop them on a German city, it would take the whole block down. I mean one bomb, and they were tremendous size. They were, oh, as big as the couch there.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROHR: And that—at least that—that high. I mean, they were tremendous size.

LEVINE: Four feet, uh-huh.

ROHR: And when they dropped them, that was the end of the whole block, so they called them block busters.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROHR: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: So you were down in the—where were you exactly on the ship this whole time before you came up?

ROHR: In the hold.

LEVINE: In the hold.

ROHR: The number two hold.

LEVINE: Number two hold. And you were—and you were using a compressor, or what were you—

ROHR: The handy billy.

LEVINE: Handy billy.

ROHR: Yeah, that's all we had. I'm not—they couldn't have brought the other big compressors onboard. It would have been impossible to maneuver them.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. So when you got off, when you got on the—

ROHR: Well, when I got off, I was sort of in a daze and I didn't—they says, "Come on into the cabin," you know, to get warm, and I was cold, but I says—and I seen the smoke because they were all smoking in there. I says, "No, sir." I says, "I'm not coming in there. I'm staying outside here, because I had enough of that." The only protection we had on the ship was a scarf or a—or a handkerchief to keep the smoke from getting into your lungs, you know, and that's—

LEVINE: So—

ROHR: That's the biggest problem we had. We had no protection, no masks or anything to—you know, to do any kind of fire work.

LEVINE: So when you were down in that number two hold, you—there was smoke all around you all the time?

ROHR: Oh, yeah, mostly steam because that—that wall was pretty hot and toward the end you could see some flames coming through, you know, where they joined to the helm, you know. So it wouldn't have been much longer. If they couldn't have sunk it, that would have been it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: Sure.

LEVINE: So what actually happened to the ship?

ROHR: Well, I read reports on it and they said after the war—during the war they—they refloated, they put a coffer dam over it.

LEVINE: What's that?

ROHR: Well, it's like a box, a big tremendous steel box and they attach it to the hull and then they force air into it and the air would make the ship come up because it was too dangerous to handle that stuff under water with the tides and everything coming in and out. There's a very tremendous tide coming into New York when the change of tide is. It's like a sweep. It really—and they were afraid that the divers would have problems, you know, with that.

LEVINE: So—so they lifted it up and then—

ROHR: Then they lifted it up and took, you know, dis—disassembled the ammunition from it. Took it away and whatever they did with it, I don't know. But that was like the Normandy. They did the same principle. They put a coffer dam over it and sealed it up tight, you know, and then flew air into it.

LEVINE: I see, so—

ROHR: Which—which in effect, is I knew one or two seamen that were on the detail on the Normandy. Now, a ship like that, empty with all the provisions with the—with the—as a troop ship. They'd fixed it up as a troop ship, the Normandy, and she was all ready to go and then they said a—a welder started the fire. You know, through an accident a welder started the fire. Now, this Coast Guard fellow told me and the other one, too, that when they went to the hoses, they were all cut. The hoses were cut. There was no—nothing they could do. They had a couple of these—on the walls. They had a couple of tanks, you know, emergency tanks and so-forth, but for the amount of fire they had, you could throw them away, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: So he says, "That ship was sabotaged," but in the paper, nothing about sabotage. Nothing.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROHR: So they just didn't want to let the people know that—that, you know, that there was sabotage, nor on the Elestavo because why would it start in the engine room and nobody would there to—to—you know, to tell you

or to put the fire out or help to put the fire out. There's a crew on board, you know, they would certainly go down below and—

LEVINE: Right, and the crew wasn't there.

ROHR: And the crew wasn't there, so there was nobody to ask or so-forth where the crew—where the seacocks were and—

LEVINE: Huh. So you think that might have been sabotage, as well.

ROHR: Oh, sure. Absolutely, but I guess during the war you don't want to say, you know, this is an easy mark, you know, to do, "let's do more," you know. So—

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. So can you remember that—what—after you got aboard the ship and then where did—where did you go and what—how did you spend the rest of the evening? I mean how did you feel and what did you think?

ROHR: Well, we had liberty. We cleaned—we got cleaned up and at—at Jersey City, we took showers and this and that and threw our dirty stuff away. And they told us we could go on liberty if we wanted. This is at night time, in the midnight. So some of the fellows went to the barracks, but being that I lived in Brooklyn, I says, "I'm going home. I'm fed up with this," and I was really perturbed at that time. Then it was coming to me that, you know, "they left you." You know, you don't do that in the Coast Guard and that's a fact. I mean, you stick together, just like in the Marine Corps. You don't fool around by letting your buddy, you know.

LEVINE: You mean left you down in the hold?

ROHR: Right, without any indication of what was going on. So I was really upset and I told some of the officers there that "This is it. I'm going to ask for a transfer. I'm going to be a real disgruntled guy." [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: And so within a short time, they told me, "Well, we'll get you a ship," and of course then they did. We went to Ellis Island and I met some other fellows there and a lot of the fellows in Ellis Island were waiting for a ship. You know, they had a roster on who's going to go on this ship and so-forth.

LEVINE: What—at that point, Ellis Island, how was it being used by the Coast Guard?

ROHR: As a—as a—well, they said a training center, but most of the fellows there had—were older timers. Old timers. They had, you know, a little bit of service into them and they knew what a—what a hoser was and what a line was and this and so they knew. They had been aboard ships before. So it was a training—training station, also, maybe but I didn't see it. I seen maybe one or two schools that were shown how to tie knots or something like that, but we knew that, you know. But—so most of the fellows were—were from the Caven detail. They were all there now. No more Jersey City. They were all bunched together in this Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Oh, mention about how—how it happened that those that had been on the Caven detail got transferred to Ellis Island.

ROHR: Well, they—they transferred them by truck, you know, but then from once they were at Ellis Island, they went by boat and there was a [unclear] boson mate there by the name of Mr. Ellis and he required a lot of respect. He didn't fool around. He let you know that he was a newcomer. He was an elderly man. He was in his fifties, but he knew his work and he knew seamanship. And when they went on liberty, he was always there at the ferry boat and he watched the fellows going on the ferry boat and if they weren't dressed and shined up with the shoes polishes and hats squared and so-forth, they didn't get on that ferry boat. He'd turn them around, you know, and I've seen him take a skivvy shirt, which is a white shirt that the sailors had and rip it actually off a fellow and tell him, "Go change that. It's dirty." And I respected the guy a lot. I mean, I really did because he was no—no nonsense type, you know, but fair. And so when I saw that and everybody saw that, then they knew that you don't go on this ferry boat unless you're up topnotch, you know.

LEVINE: This is when you were going on the ferry boat now to get to Caven Point?

ROHR: No, we didn't take the ferry. We had another boat. This is when you went on liberty.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROHR: He was out there and that's about—that was his biggest job, but he—he's the one that say—said he would get a boat for us to go to—to go to Caven Point, rather than take a truck.

LEVINE: So he was responsible then for your—

ROHR: I'd say so because—

LEVINE: Transported by boat.

ROHR: Right. He—and it was a nice, nice boat, too. It was about, oh, fifty foot. It was quite a size and had a nice big cabin. Glass enclosed. You could see it was for somebody with a lot of money to operate, you know. It was a very high class boat.

LEVINE: You mean it was—you mean—

ROHR: Coast Guard had requisitioned it, you know, and they paid them a certain amount of use then during the war. So we used that boat every night that I was there to go and they'd pick us up the same way and bring us back to the Ellis Island. And we'd come in on the—as you come into the slip there, we'd come in on the—on the left hand side. They had like a little drop cut into the—the pier. Not the pier, the embankment like and we'd jump off there, you know, to get onto the land.

LEVINE: You mean the slip at Ellis Island?

ROHR: Yeah. Yes, ma'am.

LEVINE: So you'd go into the slip?

ROHR: You would go into the slip there, but on—not into the slip, but on where the—where the bulwarks are—the—

LEVINE: Where the—where the main building is would be, if you were going into the slip would be on your right?

ROHR: No. We would—the main building would be on—coming into the slip, the main building would be into the right, but we'd come—we'd come in and we'd park it, we'd dock on the left side.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROHR: So we'd have to walk around.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: To get to the barrack—that's not the barracks. It's the great room or whatever you call it.

LEVINE: The Great Hall.

ROHR: You know, the Great Hall, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROHR: And that is an immense building. I mean, that is a big, big hall, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROHR: But they kept the lights on all day and night. I must say that. I don't know why but those lights never shut off.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow, and how was the Great Hall rigged up for the Coast Guard at the point when you were there?

ROHR: Well, they had nothing there, other than—than bunks. Two bunks, one on top of the other like and that was—I guess there was at least, oh, thirty or forty bunks easy. Fifty bunks, I'd say in this—the whole area. Maybe even more, I don't know.

LEVINE: And they—were they filled?

ROHR: Oh, at night and during the day, sure. Like the shift would be—certain shifts would be over here and certain shifts over there. We were more towards as you came into the Great Room, we'd be, oh, where the movie house would be supposedly that they said. That's—

LEVINE: You were go—towards New Jersey?

ROHR: No, it would be toward—toward Brooklyn.

LEVINE: To—

ROHR: Towards Brooklyn on that end.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

ROHR: We would be.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: Yeah. It's quite—quite a place there that—I mean you could visualize maybe a thousand people in there easy. You know, with beds and so-forth. [clock chimes]

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROHR: Then they had a galley. Not a galley—well, we call it a galley, but it's a kitchen in one section that would be where we ate.

LEVINE: And that kitchen was in the—in the main building.

ROHR: In the Great Room, right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: To the point where almost towards the—the ferry slip like that and then they had—after that, going out, you'd have that—that causeway like, which they showed in one of the magazines there. It's all overgrown now. I don't know what they did what that.

LEVINE: Oh, you mean the covered walkway like between the buildings?

ROHR: Yeah, right. Yeah, that's it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: That—that was—I remember that very well when we come in with the ferry boat and we see those two eagles up there and that was an immense picture. That—just those two eagles up there, you know, but then the—the walkways is a nothing. You know, it's just glass and so-forth and one section they had—they used it as a rifle range, you know.

LEVINE: Which section was that?

ROHR: Well, that was as you're walking into the Great Hall, it would be on the left. They had—you could hear them going bang, bang, bang with twenty-twos in there once in awhile.

LEVINE: You mean inside?

ROHR: Yes, ma'am.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROHR: Well, not in the enclosure, but they had like a little door cut into—not into the glass. They didn't go that high, but they had a little door on the bottom. You'd have to stoop to get into this range, whatever they used to call it. Gun range or whatever.

LEVINE: Huh.

ROHR: And they'd—I never actually seen them in there, but I could hear them. They were shooting all the time.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, was—were there other people besides Coast Guard that you were aware of on Ellis Island?

ROHR: No, ma'am.

LEVINE: During that period?

ROHR: No. No, no one else in our area. They were all Coast Guard. Nobody else, although I understand there were some World War prisoners in there or something like that, but I never saw them.

LEVINE: You didn't see enemy aliens, so-called?

ROHR: No, ma'am. No.

LEVINE: Being held. Uh-huh. So—so when you went home that night, you were feeling like you'd really been duped.

ROHR: Yeah, I was really depressed. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROHR: I really felt bad. I—I can't explain what—how I really felt. It was discouraged, I guess because I knew that onboard a ship because even in Paris Island we had meet some fellows. You know, you get together closer there and they would tell you, you know, "I was on the Tampa and so-forth, and I was on different type ships that they were on," you know, and they would tell me, you know, they would never leave anybody onboard the ship. Never. So.

LEVINE: Hmm. So, but it actually got you what you wanted. You—you got out of that detail and you got—

ROHR: Oh, definitely. Yeah. That was the happiest day in my life, when I got off there and went onboard a ship, yeah, and it was an eighty-three footer, which is what I liked. I liked the small ship because the big ship, you maybe have a hundred or two hundred men on there. You won't know one from the other after awhile, you know, but on a small ship, sixteen men, you know everybody. You know everything about them.

LEVINE: What ship was it that you got on then?

ROHR: The 448, 83-448 and our duty was—well, first we did patrol and then we did work for Quonset Naval Base. Quonset is in Rhode Island and it's quite a operation. They were teaching fliers, navy fliers, ensigns and so-forth how to land on a carrier and they had the ranger, which is an aircraft carrier. It was built before the—what was the name of that ship now? The—there was another carrier. I can't think of the name any more. I have it in my mind, but it will come to me maybe, but they—it was one of the first carriers that the navy had built as a carrier.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: And the stacks that they had with I think four on one side and four on the other, and those would collapse toward the sea, you know, toward the water when they were in operation to take on fliers. You know, planes. And we worked with that, the ranger for quite awhile. She would go out and then they'd drop bombs and torpedoes and all this kind of equipment, you know, and we'd go out and fetch it. The torpedoes, especially.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: The bombs, we'd just leave them to explode and so-forth but the torpedoes they wanted. They were testing them to—to go into metal. In other words, in order for a torpedo to be fired, they'd have to get the right speed of the ship that was out there and everything like that, but they had a fellow by the name of Wassler [PH] who was in charge of this operation. An engineer, scientist or whatever you would call him, and he developed a torpedo that would adhere to metal, to a metal hull, so-to-speak, and the—they would drop the torpedo and they'd have a submarine out there, a navy submarine of course.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: An SS class, which is World War I type and that would sink and go down and then to see if the torpedo would—would adhere to him, would make a contact on him without any aiming or anything like that. And they found out that it would work. So they developed that and towards 1945 or '44 they pretty well had it sewed up that they could fire a torpedo in a different angle and if the sub was within say four or five miles, it would adhere to that.

LEVINE: Would—wow.

ROHR: And would—that was the end of the sub. Sure.

LEVINE: Well, that was an interesting duty, wasn't—

ROHR: It certainly was, but we didn't know what it was really at the time, you know. But from thinking about it and so-forth that's what—and reading about it, that's what it was.

LEVINE: So how long did you stay there in—in Rhode Island?

ROHR: Well, let's see. I guess 'til November of '44. Somewhere around there, that time. Then I got a transfer to California and went to the Pacific on an army freighter.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROHR: So. And we went to Stock—Stockton to pick it up, the ship. You know, it had already been tested and this and that. And incidentally, the Coast Guard wouldn't accept a ship that was built unless it could be launched sideways. Now, the Coast Guard had no authority over the army how to build ships, you know. So they insisted that these ships, as they came off the runway, weren't stern first, like they usually do. They had to be taken from the side and just rolled, so-to-speak, down this hill a little bit and then into the water and then it would go like this. Right?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: So that's what they—that's what—then it passed the test, so okay, she's seaworthy.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. The reason they did it was that if it could rock and not tip.

ROHR: Right, then—then they would accept it as seaworthy and the Coast Guard does that with all their ships, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: With all their cutters. They launch them sideways. In other words, they're not stern first like they do in—

LEVINE: Right.

ROHR: Like they do with the Normandy, all the other ships, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: They did it from the—from the side.

LEVINE: Oh, that's great. Okay we're going to pause here and change the tape.

ROHR: Okay.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1]
[BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE 2]

LEVINE: We're beginning here with Tape Two. I'm speaking with Alfred Rohr and I think what we'll do is we'll clear up a couple of things at the beginning here. Rather than Elestavo, it was Elastero, A-S-T-E-R-O.

ROHR: Right.

LEVINE: That was the name of the ship that had the munitions on and—

ROHR: Correct. Yes, ma'am.

LEVINE: Could have exploded. The other thing was even though it's in black and white in a newspaper article, one of which will be in the folder, in Alfred Rohr's folder in the Oral History Office files, the name of the commander when—when the Elastero was on fire—or yeah, caught fire, was Stanley Parker.

ROHR: I'd say Stanley Parker. That's true because he was made the captain of the port.

LEVINE: He was captain of the port, probably made captain of the port the day before. Right?

ROHR: Right. Yes, ma'am.

LEVINE: But we—but we had him—we had—the newspaper article gives another name for him, but—

ROHR: It could be an error.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

ROHR: I mean, so I'd like to get that in that maybe it was his name.

LEVINE: Right. It said J. T. Stanley, rather than Stanley Parker as the person was in command then.

ROHR: Correct, ma'am.

LEVINE: Okay, so that being said, let's see. Where were we? You—we had covered when you went to Rhode Island after—after that and then after that part of your career, then you went to the South Pacific?

ROHR: Then I went to the South Pacific. Yes, ma'am.

LEVINE: And where were you sent or what was your—

ROHR: Well, I was gunner's mate aboard the ship and we had a commander by the name of Mr. Mitchell and before we left San Francisco, we all got acquainted with his wife. We had a little party on the ship like. She interviewed everybody and we talked and she was a school teacher in California. He was an elderly captain. He had been in the service before the war and they called him back into the service to command our ship.

LEVINE: Just as an interviewer, what did she interview you about?

ROHR: Oh, just where we came from, you know, what part of the country, what state and so-forth, and how many—if we were married or unmarried and so-forth, you know. And we kept—we had like a log that we kept the names, so-forth of each other.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, how many of you—were you the whole contingent that was going—

ROHR: Yes, we were—it was a hundred and eighty foot ship and it was an army freighter, but it was run by the Coast Guard. There were no army personnel aboard, and the ship was designed to carry supplies to different army troops that we were going to visit, which we did. We worked up to New Guinea. From New Guinea to the Philippines and from the Philippines to Okinawa and then we went to Borneo and from Borneo we went back to Okinawa and then back into Shanghai, China.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, what period of time was that when you were on that mission?

ROHR: That was in 1945, toward the end. That was—I guess that was somewhere in—after the signing. The signing took place and we shoved off for Shanghai, the Japanese surrender and we went into Shanghai to bring water, which we had a army truck aboard and we also had an army tank on. One on each hatch cover and we hit the storm, this typhoon and we let the truck go, but we saved the water because we knew that the area would be contaminated with—with fouled up mess because the Japanese always did that to their islands that they hit. And—

LEVINE: Well, could you say a little bit that, what the Japanese did as far as their water supply?

ROHR: Well, in other words, they knew that they were going to be overtaken on some of these islands and rather than leave it in perfect shape, they ruined the water supply. So it was evidently that a fact that when the American troops come, they would need water and it was very important. More so than gasoline, more or less, and without the water, of course, they'd be in—in real trouble.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So you brought the water.

ROHR: We brought the water and, of course, supplies, also, you know, like medicine and so-forth to—to China and Shanghai was the port that we went into. And we tied up right next to a—a warehouse where they had put all the Japanese war supplies, like their machine guns and everything that they owned. Uniforms and swords and pistols. Stacks and stacks of equipment in this warehouse, and so we happened to see them, you know, conjugating [sic] around, the Japanese, and they all would turn their backs, while they were working on outside of the building and we knew that they—they were the prisoners. You know, that they were Japanese prisoners and they didn't want to face us, so they turned their back to us.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROHR: Incidentally—well, I don't know if I should say this. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Go ahead.

ROHR: That—incidentally, you know how we looked for war souvenirs after the war? So a couple of fellows, and we went into the warehouse one night. Didn't break in, because it wasn't locked and they didn't have any guards on it, so we went in there and we come out with side arms and pistols and swords, very valuable swords. So the skipper saw us coming aboard and he says, "What's this here?" She says, "No." He says, "You can't take that with you." He says, "You're going to have to take that back." He says, "I won't allow that," and he says, "You take it back, all back and after you come back, then we're going to have an inspection." He says, "And there will be no pistols and no armaments of any sort on this ship."

LEVINE: Wow. Yeah.

ROHR: So he was, you know—

LEVINE: So it was the right thing, I suppose.

ROHR: It was the right thing, of course. We didn't understand what it was all about, but you can't have that onboard a ship.

LEVINE: Do you—do you remember where you were and how you reacted and other people did when you found out the war was over?

ROHR: We were happy. Very happy and of course we didn't know too much about the bomb that caused it, you know, but we were darn glad because we knew that they weren't going to be an easy match to fight. You know, even in Japan—in the Japanese territory, their homeland, they would have fought to the last man. And, in fact, the way they—the way they worked their—their invasions and everything else was to the last man. They could care less how many were killed, as long as they got what they wanted.

LEVINE: What could you say, just what occurs to you, but what do you think you learned about—what do you think you learned being in the military?

ROHR: Well, I'll tell you, you know, it's a funny thing. You go through something like this and they take four years of your life, and you wonder why, and then you realize, "Well, it's because that somebody started trouble and he knew he could get away with it and did get away with it," and the—the only way to stop people like that is to be stronger than they were. It's as simple as that, and if you haven't got that behind you, you have really nothing. So my advice is that you just keep a big stick and make sure that—that they don't start anything. That's all.

LEVINE: And how about you personally, like those four years out of your life. Do you think that it—it—it effected the person you became after that in any way?

ROHR: Well, I would say so. I mean it—it made me think that I wanted to do something that I enjoyed and I didn't want to work at something I didn't like because I had seen too much of that where people disgruntled, you know, that they have to work at such a job that they didn't like. And so I wanted to make darn sure that I could get a job that I liked, even if it cost me low pay.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, because you had—well you went from something—you went to a number of different things while you were in the course of being in the Coast Guard. Some I guess you liked better than others.

ROHR: Well, yes, I decided I'd like to build ship models because I had done that before, just my own hobby, so-to-speak, and I went to Cox and Gibbs in

New York and they were filled up. They weren't hiring anybody on Broadway, 25 Broadway. So I decided I'd look around for a smaller company and there was a Boucher. It was a French company but they were making models of the Grace Line, and United Fruit, some of their ships. And so I decided I'd go there and I was hired and I enjoyed it very much. Incidentally, they made the model in Hawaii of the Arizona that is on display there of the original ship. They have a—I think it's a four foot model at least of the original Arizona. So that the last contract they had on that ship.

LEVINE: So that's what you did after you got out? That was your first—

ROHR: After I got out of the service. Yes, ma'am.

LEVINE: How about—how about being faced with death? I mean, being with the Elastero and also then going to the South Pacific, do you think that changed you in some way or made an impact?

ROHR: Well, in a way I guess it did. It made me feel like I wanted to enjoy life. I didn't want to have a drudgery out of it, and there's nothing worse than being alive and not doing something that you want to do. I mean, it's sort of a waste, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and how about be—

ROHR: So—

LEVINE: I'm sorry.

ROHR: That's all right.

LEVINE: How about being in the military and particularly in the Coast Guard? How do you reflect on that at this point in time?

ROHR: Well, I liked the Coast Guard. It was a very good organization and I liked the people in it, and if—if you have the stuff in you, you know, your education and so-forth, you can be anything you want and they will advance you and they will teach you. I think it's a wonderful branch of the service, and to be honest, I think they do a well-earned job in saving lives, too, especially on some of these cruise ships, which a lot of people don't understand. That they're very lax and you see very few cruise ships that under the American flag simply because they—they run them at a—at a high moral rate or whatever you would call it. They won't let you know where the life preservers are and how to abandon ship and things like that. You're really taught that. So.

They—I, while I was on duty once, before we went into Caven Point, they were checking one of the ships out, the Coast Guard. It was an American ship and they wanted to check the life—life boats, so they had the life boats half suspended down, about the—just about the height of the hull, the black hull or the gray hull or whatever, and then they would drop it from that height into the water. And if it survived that, then they okayed that it had—you know, that the life boats were in good standing. So.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. Well, just jumping back to the Caven Point incident again, were you ever acknowledged for—for your bravery in that incident?

ROHR: They sent a letter from the captain, from the Admiral Wayshee. [PH]Actually, he's not a captain, he's an admiral of the—commanding officer of the outfit and he sent a letter of commendation, you know, that we did a nice job and so-forth.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: But I hope that they never have a pier like that in New York again. I mean that's a little out of the way for that amount of armament to be loaded on a—on a ship and, you know, other things can happen to other ships.

LEVINE: Why don't you talk about why that happened to be right next to New York City at that time and what they've done since that time?

ROHR: Well, during World War I it was called Black Tom and they used it to load ammunition. Maybe not to the quantity that they did in this war, but they had the railroad tracks and they just extended the railroad tracks onto the pier. And they had it so that two trains could go on it and it was really—it was made for that and it was built--already built, practically. So it wasn't—it would take maybe a week to put it in shape. Whereas, otherwise if they moved it into the Jersey Shore or some place else, it would take them maybe a couple of months before they could have it in operation. So this way it was already made and they could do the work, although it was dangerous for the city. New York, you know, if it would a went up, they would a paid a price for that because it done a lot of damage.

LEVINE: And how about now?

ROHR: Well, now they don't have it there any more. It's—I think the pier's still there or parts of it. Maybe the pilings, but I don't think they'd ever use it for that. It's off the Jersey coast on the Atlantic Coast that they have a pier made now, built especially to load ammunition and it's in a wayward

place where there's no buildings or, you know, civilian personnel around. So it's a much safer place, though. I haven't seen it, but I've seen pictures of it, that it was there, and the Missouri, when she comes in, she unloads her armament off there, if she has to come into dry dock to have work done or something like that in New York. So it's a safety feature.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And talking about your first job with the model ships, why don't you say the model ships that you've made that you have?

ROHR: Oh, I have two model ships that I built. One is from the FS 404, and the other one is from the sub chaser 83-448. I built the 83-448 is one inch to the foot and the 404 is one quarter inch to the foot. So she was a hundred and eighty foot in length. So it makes quite a nice model and what you learned—I worked for Boucher for about a year and a half—you put to this and it was a nice hobby. I enjoy doing it.

LEVINE: And they're the two ships that you were actually on?

ROHR: Well, the—what's the name of this? [speaking in background] Huh? Oh, the Newsboy. I made that. That's a sailing vessel. I wasn't aboard this one, but I always admired her because she was such a nice looking ship, the pictures I saw of her.

LEVINE: That's beautiful.

ROHR: And she worked out of Boston and I guess until about maybe the 19th century, somewhere in the 19th century they—they built her and she ran coast wise from Boston to New York, from New York down to Virginia and South Carolina and so-forth. As a—as a—not as a cruise ship, as a regular cargo ship.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Wow, they're all beautiful. Beautifully done. So then what did you do, after you left the ship model building job?

ROHR: Well, then I went to—I just figured, well, you can't depend on the model industry to keep you going and fed, and I was married then, so I better look for a job that had some kind of a future. So I went to Remington Rand and they—they hired me and everything went fine. I learned the product that they sold, the calculators that they made. The bookkeepers and other things, check writers and so-forth, and I enjoyed that work because you didn't have to sell anything. You could just do your work and they would leave you alone, and if you didn't have repeat calls, like we'd say, you'd go back again because they'd know you were good and you knew your work. Where if you had a lot of repeat calls, then you'd have to go into the office and get retrained and sometimes they would let you go. [Laughs]

- LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how long did you stay with Remington Rand?
- ROHR: Oh, I guess twenty-five—about twenty, twenty some odd years, huh? At least [unclear]. About twenty-five.
- LEVINE: And then did you retire from there?
- ROHR: Then I decided—no. I says, “You going to give all your money to Remington Rand. You go in business for yourself,” and who told me to do it? It was one of the supervisors in Rockefeller organization. He told me once, he says, “Al.” He says, “Why don’t you go in business for yourself?” I says, “Well, I can’t afford the hospitalization.” I says, “It would cost me too much money.” He says, “All right, Al.” He says, “Listen, if you want to go into business,” he says, “that’s fine.” He says, “If you have anybody sick in your house or your family, your immediate family or children,” he says, “you just let us know and we’ll take care of all the bills.”
- LEVINE: Now, you say Rockefeller organization? What was that?
- ROHR: The Rockefeller Found—I worked for the Rockefeller Foundation and his office was on 5th Avenue. 6th Avenue and 50th Street. I don’t know exactly. I think it was 630 5th Avenue. 630 6th Avenue.
- LEVINE: 6th Avenue. So you were selling Remington Rand to them?
- ROHR: Eventually, yeah. I would go up there and they’d—they’d buy them from me, but I—it started off with he started me in—into the business and I’m trying to think of his name, the fellow who was the supervisor. Well, maybe it will come to me. You can stick it in some place. He—and I says, “You’re kidding me?” He says, “No.” He says, “We will,” he says. “We will pay,” he says, “but if you buy a car or a truck for your business,” he says, “we won’t pay for that.” He was explicit about that. He says, “We won’t, you know, for any other bills, but hospitalization,” he says, “we’ll pay the full amount.” So I says, “Well, what am I going to lose?” He says—I told him. “I certainly will try it.” So that’s what I did.
- LEVINE: Well, I’m a little mixed up. Why did he—why did he suggest that to you? What was your connection with him at that point?
- ROHR: Well, whenever they had a machine out of order, I’d go to him.
- LEVINE: I see.

ROHR: And he'd show me where the machine was or how many machines were out of order, you know.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

ROHR: And I never had to go back. You know what I mean? Not the same machine. [unclear] [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I see. So then you started your own business, and how did that go?

ROHR: Went very well. I had—at the beginning I asked a partner to go with me, and from Remington Rand. He was a serviceman, also, and he was well liked by his customers downtown and I was uptown. So we distinguished that by 23rd Street. Anything below 23rd Street was his territory; anything above 23rd was mine. So it worked out fine until, you know, as a partnership goes, you might be honest and so-forth, and he is honest at the beginning, but he needs money at certain times and the weekend's coming up, so the check—extra check is made. And not a good deal because I found out. My wife found it out, not me, and we were in debt—he was in debt to me for a couple thousand dollars. So we decided to end that and we—I just changed the name and told him, you know, "This is—this isn't working out."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So then you continued without a partner.

ROHR: Under Arco, A-R-C-O. That was the name. We used to have Arc, A-R-C with him and then we just cut the business and I says, "All right, I'll just add an O to it and be Arco, and you can do what you want."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ROHR: So that's what we did and he didn't last very long. He gave up.

LEVINE: I see. So then you stayed with that business until you retired?

ROHR: Until I decided to retire.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: Yes, ma'am. So.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: It worked out fine. I enjoyed the work. I tried to teach—tried to teach the customers how to use these newfangled machines and they were

coming out with the new electronic stuff then, you know. And that business is all fine and dandy. The only problem is, there's very little engineering work or any parts to be replaced. It's either you take out a unit and throw it away and put in a new unit, or that's it. Throw the whole thing away. So I—I couldn't like—I didn't like that part because there was no skill attached to it. You're just a—sort of a nothing. You just—so that's why I decided I wanted to retire and I had enough time and money. So I said, "The heck with it."

LEVINE: Well, do you—do you feel that you really lived out the idea of—of doing what was of interest in your work?

ROHR: Oh, yes. Yes, ma'am. I really enjoyed that part. The rest of it, I mean from the service into what I did after the service, I can't say I did something wrong. I mean, I did everything the way I wanted to do it and more or less when I—when I wanted to do it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROHR: But—

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how do you—

ROHR: So I really enjoyed it.

LEVINE: How do you like being in Homosassa, Florida?

ROHR: Oh, I love this place. It's really nice. The only thing is it—it gets to be—you know, you can't stop progress and eventually big business will take over and you get these discount houses and they'll build umpteen acres of land and, you know, put the little guy out of business. The little paint store you used to do business with and the hardware store and so-forth and so on. Big business takes over, there's no getting it. No stopping that.

LEVINE: Yeah, I think this part of Florida is unique.

ROHR: It is.

LEVINE: Right now because it hasn't been taken over yet.

ROHR: And it will be another maybe five, ten years before it will.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh.

ROHR: We won't be here for the rest of it. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Wow. Well, you know, consider—I mean, I'm thinking of you as a—as a hero.

ROHR: I'm not a hero.

LEVINE: In the—in—in the—certainly in the Elastero incident. Did you personally have any heroes in your lifetime, either people you know or people you knew of?

ROHR: I would say—I would say my father because when I went into the service, he—I says, "You know, I'm going to join the Coast Guard and, you know, I'm going to have to do this kind of work and I don't know if it's a relative out there we're fighting." He says to me, "You do what you have to do." [voice breaks up]

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah, and you did, right?

ROHR: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Great. Did you—did you—when you were stationed at Ellis Island, did the immigrant aspect of that, I mean your father having come from Germany—

ROHR: Yes.

LEVINE: Was that something that you were very conscious of at that point?

ROHR: It was. It—you know, I mean took a lot of guts to come over and to start, you know, to make a family and so-forth. A lot of hard work. A lot of hard work. Like he used to say, nickels and dimes. But he—see, he saved the nickels and dimes. He didn't spend it, and that's what people don't understand today. They don't understand how to—how to save. They got the 'gimmies' and they want what they want and when they want it. Not—you know, if it takes them three or four years to pay, it doesn't make any difference, they want it. So. New cars. Everybody has a new car, you know. I still have my old '82. [Laughs] [voice in background] '86 Chrysler, yeah. I couldn't part with that.

LEVINE: I beat you. I got an '85. [Laughs]

ROHR: Yeah? Oh, all right. They don't make cars like that no more.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROHR: This is an old saying “they don’t make it anymore,” but the parts in it are a little more substantial than what they put in the new ones. They last for a certain length of time and they know how long they’ll last. So that’s the same with machine lines. They know exactly how long the motors are going to last and how long this is last and when the time is up on it, you have to buy a new one. It’s as simple as that.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Well, now, is there anything else that you can think of that you might want to mention before we close? [clock chimes]

ROHR: No, just I—if I had a son, I’d ask him to go into the Coast Guard, but being as I don’t have a son, I can’t. [Laughs] But it’s a good outfit.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. Well, that’s—that’s quite a recommendation, actually, for the Coast Guard. I want to say, too, that this house was obvious to me driving up because of the American flag and a flag of the Statue of Liberty flying out front. It’s was really lovely.

ROHR: Well, it means a lot to me and it’s just a statue to some people, but—

LEVINE: Well you per—had a personal hand in protecting it and defending it during the Elastero incident.

ROHR: Yeah, it wouldn’t have been much left if it would a went. Even if just the one ship went, it would a flattened it down.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ROHR: But that’s—you know, those European countries, they don’t consider that. That’s nothing. That’s just a way of throwing—you know, throwing their weight around, making moral go deep.

LEVINE: I’m sorry—say—

ROHR: Well, the moral is—they wanted to ruin the moral of this country by doing things like that, you know. By sabotage and so-forth. You see it today with things that they do and try and get away with. It’s terrible because the fact that they think that they can—that they can change your way and it’s just not going to be like that.

LEVINE: Well, I want to say it’s been a real pleasure. I thank you so much for this wonderful interview. It will now be part of the collection at Ellis Island for posterity and I’m very happy to have had the privilege to conduct it. So I’ve been speaking with Alfred Rohr. It’s March 12th, 1999. I’m in Homosassa, Florida and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I’m signing off.

ROHR: Glad to be meeting you.

LEVINE: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]