

**EI-1408**

**JOSEPH W. WRIGHT**

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**RESIDENCES:**

LEVINE: Today is April the 4<sup>th</sup>, the year 2006. I'm here in Baltimore with Joseph W. Wright, who was at Ellis Island in the Coast Guard for just a few days in April of 1945. He was waiting to go to a—a separation center in Brooklyn.

WRIGHT: Yeah. It's [unclear]. Excuse me.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. We're going to pause here for a second. [tape off/on] Mr. Wright's daughter, Sherry, just arrived. [clears throat] Okay. So you were on your way to a separation center?

WRIGHT: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. So that means that you were at the end of your Coast Guard service. Is that right?

WRIGHT: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. Okay. Now, we—we talked a little bit before we started. You grew up in New Jersey.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did you have any immigrants in your family? Did your family immigrate?

WRIGHT: No. My mother and father were born here. My mother and father—and mother were born here. My father—I think his father was born in England.

LEVINE: Oh, your grandfather?

WRIGHT: And—grandfather.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: I see.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you know if they came through Ellis Island?

WRIGHT: I don't know. I don't know. I—I didn't know him that well.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay. So I see here that you joined. You were not drafted. You joined the Coast Guard.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And why did you do that?

WRIGHT: [chuckles] It's a long story.

LEVINE: Go ahead.

WRIGHT: My brother come home. He was in the Army, Air Force and he come home and he was complaining about the Army and I was 17 at the time. And I conned my mother into signing for me. I says, "Ma, look they're—drive these little picket boats around the harbor and they—they stay in Perth, Amboy in the Army over there." [chuckles] So—

LEVINE: She believed you.

WRIGHT: She believed me. That's not—not nice, lying to your mother, is it?  
[chuckles]

LEVINE: Well, why did you want to go in so much?

WRIGHT: I knew I was going to get drafted, you know. And I had enough of school. [chuckles] I—I didn't finish high school and so, rather than get drafted, I joined.

LEVINE: And wh—did you really believe that what—half of what you told your mother? That is, it was a safer—

WRIGHT: No. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, you didn't. I see. [chuckles]

WRIGHT: [laughs]

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. So—so you joined and—and where did you go?

WRIGHT: I took my training at Manhattan Beach. You know where Manhattan Beach is? It's between Coney Island and the merchant marine, the academy, Sheepshead Bay.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: So I was over there from June 25<sup>th</sup> to September sometime.

LEVINE: Now, so June 25<sup>th</sup> of what year? What year did you join?

WRIGHT: 1943.

LEVINE: '43. So the war was going on when you joined?

WRIGHT: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: I took basic training over there. Then I went to New River, North Carolina, Camp Lejeune.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: And there was about a hundred of us went down there and we took amphibious training. Let me think of the dates. I went down in

September. By the—we didn't go into training. We had to wait a while so we did guard duty, KP and stuff. I wound up with KP. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Seems like everybody wound up with KP.

WRIGHT: Yeah. Took training down there and—

LEVINE: Now, what did you—do—were you interested in training in a particular thing? I mean, did you make that choice?

WRIGHT: Well, they want to send to me to diesel school and I didn't want to go. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: So I—I—we went aboard ship in Norfolk and we left Camp Lejeune on New Year's Day, that '44. And we rode by bus up to Norfolk and was in the receiving station there a couple days, and we picked up our boats and we rowed out to the [unclear] out there and went aboard the ship.

LEVINE: Now, when you say you got on—does that mean that you were in the amphibian—

WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —unit or something?

WRIGHT: Yeah, uh-huh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: And, oh, we shake—went on shakedown up in the Chesapeake—you know, on maneuvers in Soloman Islands and—up there and made two or three trips up there. Then we went to New York on Staten Island and we loaded to go to England. So we left in—sometime in February.

LEVINE: This is now '44, right?

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: And we went to Liverpool. We unloaded in Liverpool and we went up to Scotland, Loch [unclear], a place called Garach [PH]. [chuckles] Don't ask me to spell that. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Okay. [chuckles]

WRIGHT: And we were up there a while and I got to Glasgow. And while we were up there, they were assembling ships for the invasion of Normandy. But I lucked out. Our ship and a couple other ships went to the Mediterranean and we—we wound up in Algeria in a place called MEK [PH] and Noran [PH].

LEVINE: Are you spelling it or saying it? M-E-K?

WRIGHT: M-E-K. That's Mel's El Kabeer [PH]. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: We called it MEK.

LEVINE: Okay. And what were you doing there?

WRIGHT: We were just keeping Germans busy. You know, we had a bunch of ships there in the Mediterranean. And we'd combat load and we'd go down the coast about 30, 40 miles to a place called Arzoo [PH]. [laughs] It was just nothing but a little village and we unload on the beach. And we go back and load up again and then maybe we'd go to England—or not—to Italy and then back again and do the same thing over again, then come to—over to Sicily, maybe.

LEVINE: What were you loading up?

WRIGHT: Troops that were in Africa. We were bringing them over to—troops and equipment. We were bringing them [unclear]. [chuckles] This got to be television. [laughs]

LEVINE: [chuckles]

WRIGHT: And we were taking the troops. We were moving them closer. You know, taking them out of Africa, bringing them to Europe. And I got to see a lot of things over there in Italy and Sicily. I won't go into that. [chuckles]

LEVINE: You mean as part of your—of your Coast Guard?

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: When you s—are you saying that because they were so bad or—

WRIGHT: No, no, no, no.

LEVINE: No.

WRIGHT: No. It—then we loaded up in Naples and they took us onto a ship, all the [unclear] onto a ship and they—they give us charts and—and diagrams of the beach and gun placements and stuff. It's supposed to be a big secret. When we sailed out of the harbor, all the Italians were down on the dock waving goodbye. [chuckles] So—

LEVINE: And did you have Italian people on board that you were going to bring—

WRIGHT: No, no.

LEVINE: No. Okay.

WRIGHT: These were American troops who were taken from Naples and we loaded—unloaded in—oh, boy, it left me—at a city down near on—the southern coast of France over near Italy.

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: We—we started unloading eight o'clock in the morning and we got unloaded by six o'clock at night.

LEVINE: This was unloading the American troops?

WRIGHT: The troops, Jeeps and tanks and stuff.

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: And while I was there, one—one LST [PH] got hit on the beach. I—I was right next to it. I was about a half mile off when it got hit on the beach and burnt. I think that was the only ship that got hit on that part of the beach.

LEVINE: Hmm.

WRIGHT: So we made five trips from Algeria to Marseilles, unloaded there, was there five times and got one foot ashore. [chuckles]

LEVINE: One foot ashore?

WRIGHT: One foot ashore. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So it was—it was—it was a lot—it was busy. It was—it was intense, I would imagine.

WRIGHT: Ah, it was work.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: It was work. But the invasion went off like clockwork. I mean, it—it—it was nothing like Normandy. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: I made five trips to Marseilles and then we come back to Oran [PH] and then we left for the States.

LEVINE: Now, by the time that happened, what—around when was that when you got back to the States?

WRIGHT: Election eve, 1944.

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: We—we came into Norfolk. Our ship went into dry dock, for the bottom to be painted and stuff, and we had some repairs and stuff on it. I had 14 days leave and I was in Panama City, Panama Christmas Eve, [chuckles] 1944.

LEVINE: Well, okay, so you—but so you came into Norfolk in—in—in November, '44. And then what were you do—how'd you get to Panama? Why were—

WRIGHT: On the ship. We were going through the canal. We—I got ashore in Panama Christmas Eve, [chuckles] 1944. And we went to Honolulu, unloaded.

LEVINE: What'd you have on you—on then? What'd you unload?

WRIGHT: We had all kind of stuff. I think we had a small railroad engine. They have a narrow gauge railroad in Hawaii. I think we had a—on our deck I think we had an engine.

LEVINE: Wow.

WRIGHT: [chuckles] We were—we went on maneuvers there. You know, we—we changed part of the crew and stuff and we went on maneuvers someplace. It had the black beach. I don't know what island it is.  
[laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. [unclear]. [unclear], I guess.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: And we combat loaded. We had a mixture of everybody on the ship. We had Army, Navy, Marines, CB [PH]. And we combat loaded and left. We were in a lot of different places. We—we had the troops on. We—we were in Guam, Saipan, Eulythe [PH]. We went all the way down to the Solomon Islands.

LEVINE: Hmm.

WRIGHT: —to Lauge [PH] and Guadalcanal. They're only about 15 miles apart in a straight run [unclear]. And—

LEVINE: So this was a very large ship but the Coast Guard was running it?

WRIGHT: It was a Navy ship but we run it.

LEVINE: Right.

WRIGHT: Yeah. We—

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of that ship?

WRIGHT: USS Cepheus—C-E-P-H-E-U-S. AKA 18. We left Lauge and we went to Eulythe where the aircraft carrier, Franklin (she'd been hit off Japan there and she was [unclear], still smoking.) [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: And we left from there to make the invasion of Okinawa April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945, Easter Sunday.

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: We were there, I don't know, 16 days, 17 days. We had, like, 97 air raids. We left there. We went to the Philippines, Manila. We loaded up there off the beach and we went to a little island off Okinawa. And they

left—it was only a small island where Er—Ernie Pyle got killed. Oh, you don't know. [chuckles] He—he was a famous combat reporter from Europe and he went to the Pacific and he got killed there. We unloaded there and we worked 60 hours straight [chuckles] unloading. And then from there we went all the way down to New Zealand. It's beautiful down there. [chuckles] On the way down there, the war in Europe ended and they loaded the last bunch of Marines and equipment out of there. And as we were going north, the war in Japan ended. So I wound up in Japan 11 days after [chuckles]—after they surrendered.

LEVINE: What was it I—[clears throat] what was it like there then?

WRIGHT: Ah, this town there was completely burnt out. All you could—got to tie the hands together—all you see was chimneys and—and front steps, masonry work standing, you know. Down the port area, everything looked pretty much intact. That was Kore [PH]. Then we un—unloaded in Sesible [PH]. There was a couple aircraft carriers in the harbor, Japanese aircraft carriers, Liston [PH] and was a—a des—a cruiser in the harbor that was grounded with its bow blown off. And there was a—a great big shipyard down there, made two trips there, one to—one I'm telling you about, and then another one from the Philippines back to Japan. We left Japan for the States and we arrived in Portland, Oregon and we got rid of the [unclear] boats. And we were up there a couple weeks. Then we went to San Francisco and they loaded it up with gasoline, kerosene and diesel oil in 55-gallon drums all the way from the bilger [PH] all the way up to the hatch covers. And we went to China. [chuckles] It took about 30 days, I think, to get there and I—we were there about 30 days and we got one day ashore. [laughs] It was quite a city. It was—I don't know what it's called now. It was called Tinsen [PH] then. I don't know what it's called now. It's—was right across from Korea.

LEVINE: Just to back up a second, what was it like being in all those raids when you were in Japan?

WRIGHT: In Japan?

LEVINE: Were—didn't you say that you were—there were about 30 raids that you witnessed?

WRIGHT: Oh, in Okinawa.

LEVINE: In Okinawa.

WRIGHT: Yeah, the—these kamikazes come over and they fly around and [chuckles] look like the Fourth of July. And they just fly around, fly

around till they got enough nerve to hit a ship and it was—it got so that they wouldn't fire at 'em unless they come towards the ship. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: Because—

LEVINE: Now, in other words, your ship could have been hit by one of these.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: But it wasn't?

WRIGHT: No. They were—I don't know why but they had a thing for destroyers. They were—we had destroyers, like Circuma [PH] out—out miles from us, you know, the battleships protecting the—the cargo ships, you know. And for some reason or another, they were trying to sink the destroyers, I guess, the—so they could get in with their surface ships, you know. But—

LEVINE: I'm sorry. So then you went to China. Right?

WRIGHT: China.

LEVINE: To China and—

WRIGHT: Then we come back to San Francisco and we brought back Navy men that had—for discharge. [chuckles] I had more sea duty than they had time in the service. I—I almost had enough points to get out.

LEVINE: Were you looking forward to getting out?

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: So they sent us around the East Coast. We had a new captain on the ship and he almost killed a half a dozen men and [chuckles]—

LEVINE: How so?

WRIGHT: He was trying to make a name for himself, you know. A French freighter run aground so the Coast Guard to the rescue, you know. He put boats over and a couple men almost got killed in the boats going over the side there so—it's a—it's a long story. [chuckles] It got—we took a woman and a—and a boy back to Norfolk. We let 'em off at Norfolk. And some of the boats we carried from the West Coast we let off there. And we didn't even go ashore. They put the boat—somebody come out for the boats and we put the boats in the water. And we continued up to New York.

LEVINE: Now, why did you take on this woman and—and a boy?

WRIGHT: They were on that ship. The ship was grounded out—out there, you know. And she needed—she didn't want to stay with the ship, you know.

LEVINE: So can you remember when you learned that the war was over?

WRIGHT: Can I remember?

LEVINE: When you learned that it was over? Either in Europe or—and/or Japan [unclear]?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I was on my way to New Zealand when the war in Europe was over. And the war in the Pacific ended when—when our—when we were on our way north, we learned the war was over.

LEVINE: Was that soon after all the raids—

WRIGHT: Oh, no. That—after the air raids, we went down to New Zealand.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: So that's like 15—15, 20 days, you know.

LEVINE: I see. So what—when the war was over, how did you feel and what—how did the guys on your ship react?

WRIGHT: You know, [chuckles] I don't remember.

LEVINE: You don't remember? Okay. Uh-huh. It wasn't [unclear]?

WRIGHT: No, there was no—I—I don't think there was any—any big fuss made. I'm glad it was over with, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

WRIGHT: We come around the East Coast and we laid off Gray's End Bay [PH]. You know where Gray's End Bay is?

LEVINE: I'm not sure. I—

WRIGHT: Down near the Verrazano Bridge, where the Verrazano [unclear] on—

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: By Coney Island between Coney Island and Bay's—Verrazano Bridge. We laid down there. Then we laid off St. George, Staten Island.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: And we were unloading stuff. You know, you got a lot of—a lot of stuff on a ship to unload. You know, like all the stores, like nuts and bolts and screws and cables and ropes and stuff, you know.

LEVINE: Where'd you get them from? Where'd you load them from?

WRIGHT: Oh, they were on the ship. That was our own stuff. That wasn't—

LEVINE: Oh. So did your amphibian training—did you use your amphibian training?

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: In what way?

WRIGHT: I was a coxswain of a landing barge. Yeah. There was a hundred of us who went down there and we pretty much, the whole service time we stood together there.

LEVINE: Do you keep in touch with any of those people?

WRIGHT: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah?

WRIGHT: We have reunion every—every year. And then the ship went over to Todd [PH] Shipyard. That's right across from Governor's Island.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: And was over there and I got the good news one day. My—told to pack my stuff and I packed my stuff.

LEVINE: Now, was that—like, you were in for what? You were in—when you signed up, what'd you sign up for?

WRIGHT: Ah—

LEVINE: I mean, how long?

WRIGHT: Three years.

LEVINE: Three years. I see.

WRIGHT: But it was like the duration in six months, you know. So—and a tugboat took us from there to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now, what was Ellis Island like? What did you see and—

WRIGHT: Ah—

LEVINE: —what did you hear? And who was there?

WRIGHT: You know, that—that slip in front of the main building?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: It was the—something sunk there. I don't know whether it was a ferryboat or excursion boat. Do you know what it was?

LEVINE: Ferryboat, yeah.

WRIGHT: It was a ferryboat sunk there.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: And—

LEVINE: And that was sunk then?

WRIGHT: Yeah. It went up to the main building there where the—they have the display now.

LEVINE: The—it was—it's called the New Ferry Building. It's right at the end of the slip. Right? It's right in front of that where it sunk.

WRIGHT: That don't—that don't go on [unclear]. [chuckles] Right in front of the—that ferryboat.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, yeah. I know.

WRIGHT: To the right.

LEVINE: It's still there.

WRIGHT: It's still there?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: I d—I don't remember seeing it.

LEVINE: Well, it's a lot more sunk than it was when you saw it but it's—

WRIGHT: [laughs]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Yeah.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

WRIGHT: I guess it's the main entrance.

LEVINE: Well, when you go into that slip, if you go—if you're going into the slip on a—on a boat—

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: You—you look to the right.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And that's the main entrance.

WRIGHT: Yes.

LEVINE: It's like a canopy—

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: —[unclear]. Yeah.

WRIGHT: That's one of the main entrance. I think there's a hallway in—in back of the—the main room there.

LEVINE: Yeah. There's another room. I—I'm not sure, you know, what it was like when you saw it. But, yeah, there's like a smaller area—

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: —behind the bigger area where you enter.

WRIGHT: Yeah, and—

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: —then there's toilets off there, a washroom off there.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

WRIGHT: And I can't think where we bunked. Right near the toilets, one of those rooms right near the toilets.

LEVINE: On the first floor, you mean?

WRIGHT: On the first floor.

LEVINE: See, I think you were in a building behind what's called the Main Building now. I'm not sure about that. It was called the—the Kitchen, Laundry Building when the wave of immigrants came through.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: But I think it became a Coast Guard building after that. And it also is a big room and I believe the Coast Guard slept there. Now, when you were there in '45, were there any enemy aliens still held there? So-called enemy aliens, Germans, Italians, Japanese?

WRIGHT: I don't—I didn't see any.

LEVINE: Did you see any immigrants?

WRIGHT: No.

LEVINE: So when you were there, it was just the Coast Guard that you know of?

WRIGHT: That I know of. The Coast Guard had other buildings there.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: On the other side, a slip. But I wasn't there. This friend of mine was over there.

LEVINE: Well, there were hospital buildings over there too.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: So what was your experience? You got there and what happened?

WRIGHT: I can't even remember where—where I ate or anything. I was only there a couple days.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: But I had one experience there I enjoyed. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, good. What?

WRIGHT: You know, on a ship, every time it comes to load stores and stuff, the radiomen and radar men, they run and hide in—hide.

LEVINE: So they didn't have to load, you mean?

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: [unclear] stores. So one morning they got us outside there and the person in charge, the chief in charge, he says, "You, you and you," you know. He picked the right arm [unclear]. He says, "You clean the toilet." And then he'd get a bunch of guys and then somebody else policed the grounds. And he's in charge of that. So I was in charge of cleaning [chuckles] the toilet. I enjoyed it because these guys cried the blues, "I'm a radar man," and I'm this and that, you know. [chuckles] So I enjoyed it.

LEVINE: You mean they had to do—

WRIGHT: Yeah. I enjoyed it because all the things they, [chuckles] you know, got out of.

LEVINE: They had to load while you were doing that? Is that what they had to do?

WRIGHT: No, they had to clean the bathrooms.

LEVINE: Oh, they had to do that.

WRIGHT: And I was in charge of them.

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: And they cried the blues, why'd they have to do this and that? I says, "Well." I says, "Tomorrow we're all going to be civilians so you better clean it now." [laughs]

LEVINE: So I guess the radiomen and the radar men, they—they thought they were a sort of a step above? Was that—was that their—

WRIGHT: I don't know if they thought they were a st—step above but, you know, they—

LEVINE: They didn't get the dirty jobs to do.

WRIGHT: No, they—so from there I went to—I can't remember. I must have had liberty out there but I can't remember how I got ashore.

LEVINE: Well, you said here you went on a tugboat.

WRIGHT: Yeah, I went there on a tugboat.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: But how I got ashore from there, I—I can't remember. There must have been a ferry.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: There must have been a ferry because they—when I left there, they—left the ship, they told me, only bring the clothes you got on your back, you know. But I lived nearby and I had clothes ashore. But I was there a couple days so I went home and, you know [chuckles]—and from there, I went to the discharge center. It was right down the—like 500 foot from where the ship was docked. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, really?

WRIGHT: Yeah, and what I remember most was getting marched out the gate.

LEVINE: Were you happy you had—

WRIGHT: Y—it was kind of a—a—how should say?

LEVINE: Bittersweet?

WRIGHT: Bittersweet, was—was all of a sudden, you know. You—all—for two and a half years, you're—and then all of a sudden you're out the gate, goodbye. I didn't even get a nickel pay to go to the subway station. They offered us a ride in a truck to Times Square. So I turned it down. My brother came over and picked me up. And I said did he want to go down and see the ship I was on. So he said yeah. So we went down and here's my sea bag on this big dock, one lone sea bag sitting out in the middle of the dock. All those days I was gone, maybe five, six days, it sat there. There—they wouldn't ship my sea bag home because I enlisted from the Third Naval District, you know, and that was the Third Naval District. [laughs] Ah!

LEVINE: Wow. Well, it must have been a—an adjustment then when you got—when you got home. I mean, wh—I mean, hav—as you say, having been two and a half years doing something else, what was it like getting used to being not in the Coast Guard?

WRIGHT: Well, it was strange for a while, you know. [chuckles] You didn't have nobody telling you what to do, what time to get up and stuff.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: I—a funny thing. We—we lived under high-tension wires. It was metals on—I lived down ashore then. And there was metals there and high-tension wires. And the wind at night used—through the wires used to bother me. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah. Well, so did you use any of your training from the Coast Guard in your—in your work life after the Coast Guard?

WRIGHT: I had a boat built and I—I was going to run charter fishing on it but I couldn't make a living at it so—

LEVINE: At a Jer—at a Jersey shore? Is that where—

WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So what did you do instead?

WRIGHT: I built—went and worked for Heil. That's a company builds tank trucks, dump [unclear] and stuff like that. I worked for them for 10 years.

LEVINE: H-Y-L-E? Is that how you say—

WRIGHT: H-E-I-L.

LEVINE: Oh, Heil. Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: Heil Hitler.

LEVINE: Yeah, that—

WRIGHT: [chuckles] I worked for them for 10 years and they closed the plant. Then I worked up in Summit temporary for 25 years. [laughter]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: And—

LEVINE: Were you building something there?

WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah. Truck bodies and truck repair and car repair and stuff.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: But I had to retire in—when I was 58. My back went on me. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh. From the work, you think?

WRIGHT: From the work and stuff, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. So you—you mentioned on the questionnaire that you filled in that your mother told you about the explosion of the Black Tom War. That was in 1916, that explosion.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: She lived in Newark, you said.

WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What did she tell you about it?

WRIGHT: She says it was a lot of smoke and I guess she heard the noise. There was another explosion down in Morgan, New Jersey. It was a Gillespie [PH].

LEVINE: I don't know.

WRIGHT: It was an ammunition place down there in—in Serabu [PH] right near South Amboy.

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: They had a—a big plant down there along this [unclear] Crick. And it—it leveled everything. There was only two buildings standing and one partial building. And the rest were just concrete slabs.

LEVINE: Wow, uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: And her mother lived down in Kingsburg at the time. And she says she couldn't get down there because [chuckles] the railroad runs right—right in that area, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Hmm. You di—do you have any idea when that happened?

WRIGHT: During the First World War.

LEVINE: Oh, the First—uh-huh, uh-huh. Yeah. Okay, well, when you look back on your Coast Guard career now, how do you feel about it?

WRIGHT: Well, it was a thing I had to do and I did it. Yeah. I m—made a lot of good friends.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: Made a couple enemies, I guess. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: But the—

LEVINE: Do you bear any effects of—of your duty in the Coast Guard? In other words, do you still have any, you know, aftereffects of being in the situations you were in?

WRIGHT: Yeah. I—a friend of mine was killed in Norfolk. And I was looking right down his face when it happened. And every now and then it bothers me, you know.

LEVINE: What was the circumstance of that? Unless you—

WRIGHT: It was a comedy of errors, believe me. It—it—

LEVINE: Oh.

WRIGHT: You know, one mis—on board a ship or anything, one thing leads to another, you know. Boom, boom, boom, boom. It snowballs and a big lighter—you know what a lighter is, a big barge.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

WRIGHT: About 150 foot long. It broke loose from our ship and it went down to the end of the slip and it come into the—rammed our boats down there and we lost a couple of boats and stuff. And when we finally got it tied up, they were forming up to go back to the ship. And a fellow went back to the barge. He jumped on the first barge. He goes to jump on the second barge and he went between them. I was down the end of the barge on a pier, me and another fellow. I jumped on the barge and the fellow in back of me jumped on the barge, but he went off that end and I didn't know it. I run across the barge and I'm waiting for him to come up. I—I see him. The barges went apart once and he come up and he was dead then, I think. You know, and the barges went together again and I'm standing there looking for him to come up and he never did. Then I hear screaming on the other end, "Man overboard!" He went off the end of the barge and when they pulled him up he still had the pipe in his mouth. [chuckles]

LEVINE: The pipe?

WRIGHT: Yeah. He had a smoke—he was smoking a pipe.

LEVINE: Oh, my—

WRIGHT: And when, I guess, he hit the cold water he clutched [chuckles]—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: Oh.

LEVINE: Wow. Wow, wow. I guess that is something that could stick in your mind.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: But I guess—I mean, you certainly—you certainly had no guilt about it. It was nothing to do with you.

WRIGHT: Oh, not—no. No, no.

LEVINE: Yeah. Wow. Yeah. So you—you—you attend reunions, Coast Guard reunions?

WRIGHT: Oh, yeah. We started in, I think, '88 and we have one every year since then.

LEVINE: Wow.

WRIGHT: I thought—I thought last year was going to be the end so I volunteered [chuckles] to sponsor a reunion.

LEVINE: Here, in Baltimore.

WRIGHT: Yeah. Well, we're going to go to Washington. Then we're going to—we're going to—we've got three days. You know, four days but one day traveling time, you know. So we've got three days. So we're going to go to Washington two days and one day in—in Baltimore.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: But—

LEVINE: Well, that should keep you busy, getting whatever you have to do in preparation.

WRIGHT: What I got to do, I—I made arrangements for the hotel. I've made arrangements for the restaurant. So all I gotta do now is make arrangements for—for the bus.

LEVINE: What do you guys do when you get together? What do—do you rehash your—your—

WRIGHT: Well, we fight the war all over again. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles]

WRIGHT: Those guys think they won but I did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: [laughs] Oh.

LEVINE: But it must be—it must be nice to be with them again.

WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, these are all fellows that you—you didn't necessarily serve with them? Or you did?

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, you did. So the people who come to these reunions are people that you actually knew during your stint?

WRIGHT: Oh, they're off this one ship.

LEVINE: Oh, all off the same ship. Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: So I guess maybe different ships have different reunions or whatever?

WRIGHT: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: Yeah. There's one magazine. They have a whole three pages of reunions.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Okay. Well, we're near the end of the tape. Is there anything you can think of that maybe we haven't discussed that you'd like to say?

WRIGHT: No, I had a comparatively easy time of it compared to some of these Marines and soldiers and stuff. Have you see those islands out there? [chuckles] Being on one for six or eight months or a year [chuckles]—

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

WRIGHT: So—

LEVINE: So did your mother—did your mother forgive you for telling her that you were—

WRIGHT: [laughs]

LEVINE: —just going to ride around—

WRIGHT: Ah—

LEVINE: —the New Jersey shore? [chuckles]

WRIGHT: She never said anything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Did you have brothers and sisters?

WRIGHT: One brother and one sister.

LEVINE: Did your bro—was your brother in the service?

WRIGHT: He was in the Army.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: Army Air Corp.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: He went to England and [chuckles] that's as far as he got.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

WRIGHT: I had—I had uncles who was in the Army and Navy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WRIGHT: I had one uncle in the Army, one uncle in the Army Air Force, two in the Navy. One got wounded, got his fingers chopped off like that. And, oh—

LEVINE: So would you—would you do it again if you had the—the [unclear]?

WRIGHT: Oh, probably.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: Probably.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WRIGHT: I won't be so dumb this time. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] You'd do it again if you knew what you knew—what you know now, right?

WRIGHT: [chuckles] Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think we—we pretty much covered it.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And I thank you—

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: —for a very interesting interview. And I want to just ask you a few quick questions about Ellis Island. When you were there, what—was it run down?

WRIGHT: Yes, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Was it—

WRIGHT: It was run down pretty good.

LEVINE: And was it dirty?

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And—and—but—but you—when you were there, as far as you knew, you were the—the Coast Guard were the only other—were the only ones there?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I didn't—I didn't see any—any on the other side of the slip. I was only in that one building.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And as far as the other building concerned, you didn't even know if anybody was in it?

WRIGHT: No.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WRIGHT: No.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay. Well, I think that's—that's a good place to end. And I thank you very much.

WRIGHT: Yeah. You're welcome.

LEVINE: And I have been speaking with Joseph Wright. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]