

EI-341

ARTHUR W. DICKSON

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ENGLAND, 1925

AGE 4

PASSAGE ON "THE OLYMPIC"

COAST GUARD AT ELLIS ISLAND, 1941

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's June 30, 1993, and I'm here in Ellis Island in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Arthur W. Dickson. Mr. Dickson has two reasons for being included in our Oral History library, and one is that he came from England in 1925 at the age of four, and then in 1941 he came to Ellis Island for Coast Guard training. He then became a member of the basketball team, and was assigned to the laundry as a permanent position here at Ellis Island. And he stayed here until 1945.

DICKSON: No, no, no. I stayed here from January, September the

4th, 1941 till probably mid-December of 1941.

LEVINE: Oh.

DICKSON: Then I was assigned to a ship, and then left the island, because once Pearl Harbor came then, of course, everything was in chaos at that time.

LEVINE: I see. Okay. Well, then I want to say I'm very happy you're here. I look forward to hearing what you have to say on both counts. So let's start at the beginning by your giving your birth date and where you were born in England.

DICKSON: I was born May the 16th, 1921 in London, England. I, my, I had some of my relatives on my mother's side, they came through America. And writing, they must have been writing letters back to my parents about how beautiful America was. My mother was the adventurous type. My father, he had a good job. He was a drum maker making instruments for the, you know, for bands. And he didn't want to come. But, of course, my mother persevered, and we came over to America in May the 28th, 1925. We arrived on my father's birthday. Then from, the only thing I really remember about coming across is that my parents had given me a rubber

ball. The rubber ball was laying on the floor of our cabin, and it rolled back and forth as the ship kept on swaying back and forth. I don't really remember much else. I know there was, you know, bunks that we were sleeping in, but that's about all. I have not too good a recollection of that.

LEVINE: Well, let me ask you first, what was your mother's name and her maiden name?

DICKSON: My mother's name was Florence Lucy, I mean, Eliza Mogg, M-O-G-G, Dickson. My father was Richard Dickson.

LEVINE: And were you an only child?

DICKSON: I, my brother had died somewhere around 1918. He had fallen in scalding water and died. He would have been, you know, probably now would have been midway in his late seventies. And then, of course, then they had me.

LEVINE: So when, did you have extended family living near you in London that you saw?

DICKSON: My father, my father was the youngest of fourteen children, and so they all lived in London. My

grandfather who was a strange trade, he was what they call a gold beater. In other words, he'd take a little nugget of gold, and with a sixteen-pound hammer keep on pounding it until it was a very tissue-thin piece of material four inches by four inches. And years ago that was placed on the store windows. Did you ever see store windows with gold, the person's, the company's name, or something like that? That's what it was. And also he did a lot of work for Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's when they came to London.

LEVINE: You mean with for gold, for this?

DICKSON: For gold. They came over to London, England to do their performance, and then the Barnum and Bailey's, all their wagons, they had the gold leaf, you know, saying "Barnum and Bailey's Circus."

LEVINE: Wow. Do you remember your grandfather at all?

DICKSON: No. I know there's so many good stories about him. He was a man, a tall man, thin, with a little goatee. He liked his half-and-half, you know, half beer and half ale. And he would walk down to the pub and have a good time with the boys. And he belonged to the

volunteer firemen. He one time ( he laughs ), one time my father's sisters came down into the kitchen in the middle of the night, and there were eyes looking at them in the dark. And of course there was a lot of screaming and scurrying around. What had happened, my grandfather had been to a fire at a chicken house with chickens, and he had brought a couple of them home, and there they were roosting on the back of a chair. That's what the girls had seen, you know, the eyes of the chicken. ( he laughs ) So, no, I don't remember him, you know. I probably had seen him, but have no recollection whatsoever.

LEVINE: What was his name?

DICKSON: William Dickson.

LEVINE: And how about on your mother's, well, were you close to your aunts and uncles then, your father's . . .

DICKSON: Uh, he had, you know, he was the youngest, so some of them were quite old at that time. So that meant that he had a couple of, had a brother George that he was close to, and a sister Betty who never married. She was in the, making feathers for costumes for the theater in London, because London is famous for its,

you know, theaters. No, there wasn't very, too close. Again, I wish I could remember more. I think we were closer to my mother's side.

LEVINE: Now, what was, who was on your mother's side that you . . .

DICKSON: She had a sister, Rose, Rose Mogg, and her married name was Kesner. And my grandmother was Frances, uh, Frances, no, Mary Frances Mogg. She was married to a man who was in the tea business in London who had some connection with the Lipton Tea. I don't know how that came about, but that's always been mentioned. And so we were close to them. But they had come to America. They'd come to America before I was born. That's right. They came to America before I was born. So I didn't see them until we came here into New York.

LEVINE: So this is now your mother's mother and your mother's sister.

DICKSON: That's right, my aunt's, right.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about life in London? Do you have any recollections of before you actually left for the United States?

DICKSON: Yes. The apartment house that we lived in was called 93 Gravesend Building, and I remember that the back of the building was a courtyard. In back of that courtyard was little wooden sheds, perambulators, baby carriages, where the people stored them. In back of that, a street. My wife and I, some years ago, we went back to London to visit, and we were wandering around London and I pointed to that building and I said, "Virginia, that is where I was born." She said, "The paper doesn't say that this is where it was." I said, "That's where I was born." And we went back there. We walked through the little archway, came to the backyard, and there was the backyard, the perambulators, wooden, where they were stored, and the street. Great, great, great collection, and I really felt good about it. But a sad thing was that building was the only building in London that we had seen that had graffiti all over it. That kind of made me feel bad. I don't know why it did, but it did. So you can realize how old that building is, seventy-two years old, or before that.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about your actual living quarters inside?

DICKSON: No, no. I don't have any recollection whatsoever. Again, I was a little too young for it, I guess, you know what I mean.

LEVINE: Right, sure. Okay. Now, how did you, you said your father, what did your father do for work?

DICKSON: He was a drum maker. You know the drums that you play in orchestras? That was his trade. And he worked for Hawks and Sons in London. And evidently there was a very large making musical instruments.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So he was all set as far as a good job.

DICKSON: He was, that's why he didn't want to come, because he had a nice apartment, he had, you know, I guess family around. He had a business that he was in that I guess he was making a fairly good living at. So, he enjoyed it.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences that you had with your father as a young child?

DICKSON: I remember nothing in London. That is the sad part. As I say, London is kind of a blank piece. But, of course, when I came here we have a lot of remembrances.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's, then, and how about your mother?  
Do you remember anything in London about her?

DICKSON: No, nothing.

LEVINE: Okay. So the decision was made to come here with your  
mother being the instigator.

DICKSON: The prime mover. ( they laugh )

LEVINE: Okay. So then, let's see. So it was 1925, so the  
quota system was, do you remember if your mother and  
father talked about having to wait, or . . .

DICKSON: No. I think maybe part of it was that I guess my  
grandmother was vouching for my mother and father that  
they would provide, you know, dwellings and income for  
them both, the three of us I should say, till my  
father obtained a job. So that didn't seem to be any  
problem in that regard.

LEVINE: I see. Do you remember the ship?

DICKSON: Uh, the only thing I do remember is the bunks, the  
three, the bunks in our cabin and the ball rolling  
around. Outside of it I don't know I got fed or  
anything like that, but I must have got fed.

LEVINE: What color was the ball?

DICKSON: It was a multi-colored ball. ( he laughs ) I can remember that. You know, maybe a ten-inch diameter, or something like that. It was, you know, a ball that rolled back and forth as the ship would roll back and forth, you know, coming across the ocean.

LEVINE: What was the name of the ship?

DICKSON: The S.S. Olympic. I believe that was part of the Cunard Line at the time.

LEVINE: And it left from London?

DICKSON: No. It left from Southampton, because London the ships do not come up the Thames. You have to take the boat train down to Southampton and then you board it at that point, and you come across.

LEVINE: Let's see. So when you got to the New York Harbor, do you remember that at all?

DICKSON: I thought about that a great deal, and the more I think about it the more I think because we had people waiting for us at the pier that it was not necessary for us to come to Ellis Island, you know, walk, pass

through the normal procedures. And I believe what happened was that the inspectors, I guess as the Health Department came aboard ship and we were segregated in a sense that we were going to be met in Manhattan, so we didn't come over to here. I imagine that there were those who did not have people waiting who had to come through Ellis Island and go through the normal process.

LEVINE: Well, now, do you remember if you were first, second or third class, your passage?

DICKSON: Well, I know that we never had more than a few pennies to rub together, so I would imagine it wasn't, you know, first class. And I would imagine it was probably the cheapest way we could have probably come across the, on the ship, you know. I don't think there was too much of that.

LEVINE: Because very often the first and second class passengers were inspected on the ship and never came to Ellis. That's why I mentioned that.

DICKSON: Okay. As I say, I really don't know what class, but I know they didn't have much money. Because, I mean, I don't know if my grandmother aided, you know, gave us

some money. I would imagine she might have. I don't know.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember any things that struck you as a new arrival to this country?

DICKSON: I'm afraid that I can't remember anything. I thought about it, since you and I have, since we had this conversation, you know, a few days ago, I've been thinking very strongly about everything. And really I cannot put my finger on anything, you know, that this happened and that happened. No, I cannot.

LEVINE: What are the first things that you do remember being here in this country?

DICKSON: Well, I remember my grandmother apartment, which was a railroad room, rooms, on Tenth Avenue. On Tenth Avenue there were railroad tracks. And coming down the railroad tracks were freight trains with cattle in them. And in front of the freight train, in front of the engine, was a man on a white horse. And he would take the, take the cattle and the train down Tenth Avenue, because he led the way to keep everybody out of the way, and take them to the slaughterhouses on 42nd Street and around Tenth Avenue. And that's where

that was. So I remember that quite, you know, I can remember that man on a white horse and a big cowboy hat, you know, and leading the train down, and the poor animals being taken to the slaughterhouse.

LEVINE: Now, this would have been Hell's Kitchen?

DICKSON: Yes, yes. And as an anecdote to that, as a telephone man, I went back into, I had to do work in the slaughterhouse, and I went into the slaughterhouse and walked around. If this doesn't bring back, you know, from where I first came here in '25 to in the seventies, that was something to see.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember anything else about life in Hell's Kitchen in I guess it would have been the late twenties, early thirties? Were you there that long?

DICKSON: No, we weren't, we were only there a couple of years. I know that I had, I was sick, and they had to take me, oh, my tonsils were, I had a problem with my tonsils and they took me up to the Poly Clinic Hospital, which was up in the fifties at the time. And I know I went into the hospital. I thought it was the greatest thing in the world because they kept on feeding me ice cream.

LEVINE: It was called the Poly Clinic?

DICKSON: Poly Clinic, Poly Clinic, Poly Clinic, I think it was called. I don't know if it's still there any more, you know. It's been there many, many years ago. And I remember that there were a lot of trains around and there was a lot of scruffy kids, you know. We were all, it was poor. We were all in railroad flats. But everybody seemed to get along very well at that time.

LEVINE: So you started school there in Hell's Kitchen?

DICKSON: I just about started school when we moved up to 116th Street and, just off of Park Avenue. We couldn't have been up there more than six months. My parents didn't like the area. So then my mother saw in the paper that the superintendent, they were looking for superintendents out in, the address was 900 East 17th, 18th Street in Brooklyn. And so my mother, father and I, we went out there, and that's where I went to school from, I started, I think I was in the kindergarten there, and then I went to, you know, went into school, P.S. 152.

LEVINE: What did your father do before he became a

superintendent, when he first came?

DICKSON: That was his second job. He did some minor work, any kind of job that he could get. But then he worked for, he had a job with Gretch at 60 Broadway, Brooklyn, again making drums. They were a manufacturer of musical instruments. And he worked there many, many years. He retired from there, in fact. And he used to, he liked it. I mean, it was a job. It gave us an income. But it, not enough for my, as my mother felt, to get an apartment in a nice neighborhood. And she was probably right, because when we moved out to Brooklyn it was really a lovely, lovely area, you know, tree-lined, nice, big homes. So it was really lovely, met a lot of nice people, and I met my wife there, so it had to be a good move.

LEVINE: ( she laughs ) Well, did your, how did your father feel about coming here after he was here?

DICKSON: He resisted. He resisted it. And I think, for a while, he kind of felt, you know, out-of-place, you know, out-of-sorts. But then, of course, as things go on, you know, you get into it, and there was, a lot of my mother's relatives over here. There's a great many

of them. Of course, when all the parties were going on, and I remember we used to have parties at my grandmother's house, and that's when they used to make the bathtub gin. All my uncles would get, I don't know what the content was, but they'd throw it in the bathtub and they'd stir it up and they'd have some wild parties at my grandmother's house.

LEVINE: Where was your grandmother's?

DICKSON: That was on Tenth Avenue and 46th.

LEVINE: Where you first went.

DICKSON: First came, we first arrived. But there were some good parties in there. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Now, were there a lot of English people, or was it a mixture?

DICKSON: No. It was all, I think 99-94/100 percent of them were relatives, except for their husbands, which may have been American but I doubt it. Then my aunt, my Aunt Rose, she met an American whose name was Kesner, Howard Kesner. So I think he was at the parties, too.

LEVINE: And did you have lots of cousins and . . .

DICKSON: Yeah. There was a whole bunch of us kids, you know what I mean? Some good times, you know, up, you know, little kids running around with all the aunts and uncles drinking the bathtub gin. You can imagine what us kids had a good time doing. Well, as I say, it was all family so, as I say, it was very enjoyable.

LEVINE: So when you went to school in Brooklyn was it a school with a lot of immigrant children?

DICKSON: No. Brooklyn, P.S. 152 in Brooklyn was considered a silk stocking school because the people that went to it, the children that went to it, their families were usually moneyed people. A lot of the lawyers, doctors, professional people. So it was quite an affluent area. And, of course, we being superintendents, we kind of got, we got along with them, because my Mom and Dad were easy to get along with. And the kids in school were very nicely, you know, well-educated and well-dressed children. They weren't ragamuffin type of kids.

LEVINE: Now, what was the address again of the building where you lived in Brooklyn?

DICKSON: 900 East 18th Street. That's, strangely, that's right next to the Long Island Railroad, that train that used to be a passenger train used to go down to Sheepshead Bay where they used to have racing, down at the Sheepshead Bay, and years and years and years ago.

LEVINE: So what's that section called, do you know?

DICKSON: It's called Flatbush.

LEVINE: Flatbush.

DICKSON: I mean, that was what it was called then. Now there's all new names. Flatbush, Midwood, I mean, but it was a very lovely area. As I say, we lived there in that general area for many, many years.

LEVINE: So is there, is there anything that your mother or your father, any customs or habits or ways that they kept that were strictly English once they came here?

DICKSON: One of the things that was is that when my father would come home he'd always have to have a cup of, a cup of tea. Always had to have the cup of tea. It was always ready the moment he, he was very punctual. He wasn't one of these men that, you know, went to

the local bar with the boys, no. He would be home at whatever the hour was, he'd always be home. My mom would have a cup of tea, and they'd sit there, and he'd smoke, and they'd have their cup of tea, and they'd talk. So that was always, that was one of the old things.

LEVINE: Would that be, like, about, after five o'clock?

DICKSON: Yeah, somewhere around six o'clock. Now, we're getting into the Depression era and, of course, as I said, my parents, you know, didn't have a lot of money. So what they did, they had a few dollars, and they wanted to put it in a bank. Now, they didn't know anything about it. Nobody gave them any advice. So they saw a bank nearby. The word "America" was in the bank title. So they figured it's safe. They put their money into that and, of course, what happened was that went down and they lost all their money. Now, of course, years after they were getting back some money, a few dollars at a time, but really not much.

LEVINE: Were they ever sorry they had come here?

DICKSON: My mother, no. My mother, no. Of course, during

World War Two you can imagine that they felt very good about it, you know, because, you know, they were over here. Because my mother and father, well, my mother primarily went through the air raids in London during World War One, you know, when the dirigibles were bombing it, and they nearly got killed a couple of times. So it was good that they were on this side of the ocean.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else that you would say about the fact of coming here, having started your life in England and really lived the greatest part of it in this country?

DICKSON: Thank God. Thank God!

LEVINE: Okay. Well, why don't we go now to the Coast Guard part of the story.

DICKSON: Okay.

LEVINE: And, let's see. Oh, wait. I forgot a big part. How did you meet your wife?

DICKSON: Oh! We lived across the street from each other. And I lived in this new apartment house that was 800 East 13th Street, and she lived across the street in

790 East 13th Street. And, as kids, you know, we would see each other. And I was going to Pratt Institute at the time, and I'd be sitting at my window doing my homework, and she would come by and we'd start to talk. And gradually talk, and led to a movie date, and gradually kept on going on until in, my mother passed away in January of, uh, January. I can't even think of the date right now, but she passed away. And then a few months later I asked Virginia if she would marry me, and she said, "Yes."

LEVINE: Did you have to go to her father?

DICKSON: No, none of that. We just talked to each other and we said, "Do you want to go? Do you want to get married?" She said, "Yes." We were nuts about each other, really happy with each other.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you liked about Virginia?

DICKSON: I don't know. I tell you, it's a strange thing you say that. I've been, we courted for two years, and we've been married for forty-five, practically forty-five in September. And I can only say that in all those years she's the same disposition. She never has highs, never has lows. Always very, very easy. So it

made life an extremely easy time. I don't care how bad things were when I was working, or whatever happened outside the house, when I came home there was a loving wife, always clean, never sloppy, always good, always wonderful. A good mother, good to the kids, good to me.

LEVINE: So you'd do it all over again?

DICKSON: Oh, God. No question, no question.

LEVINE: Well, that's wonderful. Okay. So you were at Pratt Institute, you said?

DICKSON: Yeah. I went there for a few semesters. I went there for a couple, a semester. And then I was finding it very difficult because, you know, I'd been out of school for a while, and I was working for the New York Telephone Company at the time, and they were looking, because there was no work, telephone work, for so many years, and all the servicemen were coming back, people were working, they had money, they all wanted telephones. So it meant that we were working seven days a week, you know, working long hours.

LEVINE: And what years are these you're speaking of?

DICKSON: Oh, well, we got married in, I went to Pratt in 19, see, I came out of the service in October of '45, and I got a job with General Electric Supply Company in, just right after that. And I didn't like the job, and I got, I applied for the New York Telephone Company, and they took me on in January the 21st, 1946.

LEVINE: And then you stayed with them?

DICKSON: I stayed with them until, uh, February the 12th, 1983.

LEVINE: Well, so, in other words, when you were in the Coast Guard you had not met Virginia?

DICKSON: No, no. We had not, we had not. No, no, no. I think we probably saw each other, because we lived across the street from each other, but don't forget, from 1941 until 1945 I wasn't around very much, you know what I mean? I was mostly away.

LEVINE: Right. Okay. Well, do you remember what led to your signing up with the Coast Guard?

DICKSON: I worked for Underwood Typewriter Company for a while. And a bunch of us young fellows were, the war was coming. It looked like it was going to come. So what we were always talking about, going into the service.

None of us liked the army. We all liked the sea, the Navy. But at that time the navy was a six-year enlistment. The Coast Guard was a four-year enlistment. So I chose the Coast Guard, figuring if I make a mistake it's only for four years rather than six years. So then I went down to the recruiter, and I signed up, and that was, I came over here, over to Ellis Island on September the 4th, 1941.

LEVINE: Okay. Were you, how did you feel about going into the Coast Guard?

DICKSON: I've always loved boats, always loved them. I don't know what there is, is there an affinity for the sea. There's something about it, I don't know. Maybe it's the English heritage. ( he laughs ) I don't know if that's fact or not. But it was, you know, you feel that way about it. And I just kind of liked it. So then I joined, and one of the better things I did, because I thoroughly enjoyed my tenure in the service.

LEVINE: Now, did some of your friends from the neighborhood also join?

DICKSON: No, no, no. None of them would, none of them would do it. They were all staying in, they stayed home until

they were drafted and then they, you know, then they went into the services that they were selected for.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when you joined the Coast Guard the first place you were sent was to Ellis Island for training?

DICKSON: That is correct. We, this was a training base at the time, and they made us come here, and you went for, I think it was approximately six weeks for training. And you went through the normal, you know, marching and short order drills and rifle drills and things of this nature. One anecdote, though, I always remember, I have a friend who's a tugboat captain, and I always kid him about it. When they used to, on Ellis Island, what they would do, they would give you inoculations, you know, against various diseases. And, of course, what they wanted you to do was to move your arms around a lot to keep the circulation. So as they would put you in these long rowboats that they had on the side of, on Ellis Island were these ten- and twelve-foot oars that you had to pull. And that was the idea of circulating all this inoculation. And we would be out there, a bunch of amateurs, pulling on this, and then the tugboats would come by, and they'd see us out there, and they would have this big wash.

They'd do it purposely, of course. They'd speed up, swing the fantail around, and you know what happened?

We were bouncing around. We were digging up, we were falling in the bottom of the boat. And these men were laughing at us, a bunch, you know, a bunch of kids. So, you know, I remember that kind of a thing.

LEVINE: Right. Okay. Well, why don't we pause here so that Kevin can turn the tape over.

DICKSON: Sure.

LEVINE: And then we'll continue.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. This is Side B now, and we're continuing with Mr. Arthur Dickson talking about his initial training in the Coast Guard here, stationed here at Ellis Island. So that training was about six weeks long?

DICKSON: It was about six weeks during that period of time, so it was somewhere in the middle of October when we kind of graduated. I remember that at the termination of it they permitted our parents to come over, you know, or friends of family to come over, so my folks had

come over, you know. We showed them where we were, where our quarters were, where the dining room was, you know. We took a little walk around the place, which was nice for the family.

LEVINE: Well, it must have been particularly nice for your parents having come, well, they actually didn't come through Ellis.

DICKSON: Did not come, but, yeah. But, you know, they came into the old barge office, and they came across on the ferry into the slip, which is, you know, broken apart now. And they came over and saw the whole island. Pardon me.

LEVINE: Well, what were the accommodations like?

DICKSON: It was a barracks, an open barracks. It was a very large, open barracks. There was, in my recollection, there was a boxing ring in one corner of it because, at the time, there was a man named Marty Sevorino. That was his real name, but his boxing name was Marty Servo. He had two championship fights with Sugar Ray Robinson, who was champion at the time. And he used to train in there. So I got to talk to him a few times. Not a lot, but we talked about it.

LEVINE: Was he in the Coast Guard?

DICKSON: He was in the Coast Guard. Also we had on the base, or came over here occasionally, Commander, or Lieutenant Commander Jack Dempsey, and he would have, arranged some fights. We, one time they had some British seamen come in, and we had already set up a boxing match, which was great, you know. All the yelling and screaming of the British against the Americans. So we enjoyed that. But I was rooting harder for the Americans than I was for the British.  
( they laugh )

LEVINE: Well, now, did a lot of the Coast Guards take to boxing and fighting?

DICKSON: No. There wasn't, there was enough activity, I guess, that some of those who had done it in civilian life, they came and boxed. There was a few. There wasn't many. But, you know, they did it, because they wouldn't take anybody that just loved to fight because, you know, if they were in kind of a professionalism they didn't use them. But then the other activities was basketball which I would love to play, and I was involved in it. So we had, as our

coach, a Lieutenant Mazzada. And he had this basketball team. And we weren't very good. In fact, we were poor. So he would take us on this pleasure craft that the Coast Guard had taken over and we'd go to Sand Street in Brooklyn which is right near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and we'd play basketball there, or they'd go to Staten Island. We'd play in the Curtis High School gymnasium, and we played over there. But we weren't very good. In fact, we were poor.

LEVINE: Did you play always military teams?

DICKSON: No. We played, we played, when we went to Staten Island we played a bunch of high school kids. They ran our legs ragged, they were so good. ( he laughs ) We looked like nine-year-olds running up and down the court, they were so good.

LEVINE: I see. So you would just play whoever, whatever kind of teams you could be arranged.

DICKSON: Whatever he could get a hold of. But, of course, after December the 7th everything changed. Then there were many of the college and professional players looking to get into, they feel a service that wasn't going to go overseas, and they came into the Coast

Guard, and then they had a much better team, you know, really professional at that time.

LEVINE: So you had finished your training by then, and you were a permanent . . .

DICKSON: I was on permanent detail, and as a permanent detail giving you, giving us a job to do, I was assigned to the laundry. And we were, we were doing laundry for whoever. We did the laundry that the kitchen required. And it seems to me we were doing some of the laundry for the hospital next door, because I remember, I was assigned to the great, big press, and they would run the sheets through the press, and we would have to fold them. They'd tell you how to fold them and all that business. So that's what my assignment was. And then we'd go and have practice somewhere or the other, and then play games occasionally.

LEVINE: Now, what do you remember about the operation of the hospital when you were here?

DICKSON: Nothing, really, because all, we never went over there. It wasn't necessary, because we weren't sick, so we didn't get involved in it. But there was

something going on over there, and we never were allowed over there. We always stayed to our side. In fact, we never even went upstairs, which was all the intern seamen. They had German and Italian seamen who were on those Italian ships and German ships, and they would go, they were picked up by the Americans and brought up, and put above us, and for internment. Now, I don't know how long they were going to stay there or what was going to happen to them, but I know they were up there, because you could see them above our, above our quarters.

LEVINE: Now, so they never came down?

DICKSON: ( he sighs ) I can only remember about once that I can really remember that they came down and they came into our parade ground, and they let them kind of, you know, walk around, because there was all kinds of security at the time to make sure that they didn't jump over the side or anything like that. But that was the only time. I only remember that once.

LEVINE: I see. So the hospital, the active Coast Guard station and the interned enemy aliens, I guess, were kept very separate.

DICKSON: That's it. There was no association. The only time, well, we went through, let me go through this. We went through October and November, you know, kind of on the base of duty. And as the war clouds were coming more and more prevalent, then I was home on a weekend pass. I was in Brooklyn, and when I came, I came out to meet my friends, it's not like today where you have the TV on and the radio on all the time. They said, "You've got to leave." I said, "Why?" Then they explained to me that Pearl Harbor had bombed, and that all servicemen had to return to their barracks. So I went back home, you know, dressed into my blues and took my shaving gear and what have you, and went back to Manhattan, the lower part of Manhattan, got the ferry back, from the barge office, coming back here to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: This was a ferry specifically for Coast Guards?

DICKSON: Just for the Coast Guard, just to get, not only Coast Guard, but I guess for the hospital personnel. That's the only way the communications. The one thing I noticed about it at the time was that there were a lot of civilians, men, suits, ties, hats, with Orientals, many Orientals, and they kept them segregated from the

seamen. When I got back to the base we were walking through the corridor. And the thing that always has been in my mind since then is that on one wall was a large amount of luggage all stacked high, very, very fine luggage. It was all stacked in. Of course, what it was, the men that were dressed in those nice suits were all FBI agents, and they had rounded up Japanese citizens. Now, the thing that always amazed me, how could they find out in such a short time, only hours from the declaration of war, until they picked all these people up. There were tons of them, it seemed to me. And, of course, what they were doing with us, it was that we were then kind of given a club and, ( he clears his throat ) pardon me, and they, our duty was to kind of oversee, make sure they didn't run away, or what have you. There was nothing they could do anyway. That's what our function was, just for protection. And then I believe they put them somewhere on this island. Now, where they specifically put them, I don't know, because after December 7th the whole atmosphere on the island changed, completely.

LEVINE: Talk about that.

DICKSON: Just complete change. I don't know. The lackadaisical, happy-go-lucky times changed. It seemed to be more of a purpose, a very strong purpose. There were more guard duties and things of that nature. In fact, what they did with us, they would take us by boat over to parts of Jersey, the seaport, parts of Staten Island where any ships were being loaded with ammunition, and we would stand guard on it. And you would see them loading all kinds of shells and bombs and all kinds of military equipment onto the ships. So, as I say, the atmosphere completely changed. And then that was going on until somewhere mid-December, a little part of the late December, but prior to Christmas, because that's when I was assigned to a ship out of Staten Island. It was called the 83, it was called the CG83. It was an eighty-three-foot patrol boat. We would all put on, we went through kind of a training course up here, and then we went down into the Gulf of Mexico on anti-submarine duty and protecting the Mississippi River, because there was a lot of tankers and ships coming in there that were being sunk by the German submarines.

LEVINE: Were a lot of people being moved out of Ellis Island

at that time?

DICKSON: After that time. Then, as I say, the whole nature of the island changed. I had mentioned earlier that we had a basketball team. Now the influx of quality players, then, of course, they dropped us, and we were shipped out very quickly. They stayed here for a while. I don't know how long they stayed, and became part of the permanent assignment here and created a basketball team. That was for morale purposes, I guess.

LEVINE: And you don't know, I guess, the Japanese and Germans were still interned at Ellis Island when you were . . .

DICKSON: When I left here, I don't remember any change in what was happening to them. You know, I have no idea what happened to them afterwards. It's often wondered where they went, what they did with them. But I know, at that time, you know, as I say, the whole atmosphere changed. There was a war (?) then. You know, the secrecy. Everything was completely different. But, you know, we were talking before that my basketball coach was a Lieutenant Mazzada. And I said that I had

worked for the New York Telephone Company. The old barge office, which was an old, wooden structure. I can remember sleeping on the benches more often than not, because if you missed the last ferry that's where you had to sleep until the next, the first ferry in the morning came. They tore it down and they put up a new structure, and the new structure is what, because the telephone man, I was involved in the designing of cables and things of that nature for the Coast Guard at that point. And one day I saw this commander or a captain coming towards me, and who should it be but my Lieutenant Mazzada. It was now Captain Mazzada. He was the captain of the Port of New York, in charge of the whole port. And I said, "Hello there, Captain! How are you?" He took one look at me and said, "Nhh," and walked on. ( they laugh ) I thought I'd have, because I said to him, "I played with you for your basketball team." I thought maybe there may have been a little rapport, but no, nothing at all. ( he laughs ) What a downer.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other people, or do you still have contact with any of the people who were stationed here when you were?

DICKSON: No, but I'll tell you one thing. Thinking about Ellis Island and all the things that occurred, I remembered one name. The man's name was Sadillo. He was our instructor, and he would march us around the island. And I always remember him because he didn't say, "Hep, hep, hep," when you marched. He used to say, "Foy-a-lip, foy-a-lip." It was kind of the way, he was a great, big guy. He had such a deep voice. I always remember that. It kind of left a, and when you start talking about it, his name came back. That's the only name, and I've never seen anybody since then.

LEVINE: Yeah. So then how did you, how did your career in the Coast Guard proceed after you left here?

DICKSON: Well, when I left, when we left New York we went down through the ocean, went into Norfolk, went through the intercostal waterway which goes all the way down to Florida. Then around the tip of Florida into the Gulf of Mexico. And there I stayed until September or October of 1942 on convoy duty, escort duty, because we had a lot of ships being sunk at the time, you know. A lot of terrible things going on. Then they set me up, they sent me back here to New York, and I was stationed for some weeks in the Seaman's Church

Institute, and that's where the merchant marine, the merchant marine sailor comes into the United States. He doesn't know where to stay? That's where they can, they have living quarters there. So what they did, they put us Coast Guardsmen in there, and then they marched us down to an old beat-up ferry along the East River for electrician's school. And we go there and learning certain things that we had to know on electrician's school. Then, after that . . .

LEVINE: Excuse me. Where is the Seaman's . . .

DICKSON: The Seaman's Church Institute has now moved. It's now, if you were, it's right down on Broadway, the tip of Broadway. It's a brand-new building. It overlooks the Harbor. But at that time it was further up on the East River, around Hanover Street and something, in that area. That's where it was. But it was torn down, and now the new Seaman's Church Institute is there. As I say, that's for merchant marines. If you're ever in downtown Manhattan maybe you'll go there and get a free, good lunch. They've got a lunchroom upstairs.

LEVINE: Oh, good. ( they laugh ) Okay. So you went to

electrician's school.

DICKSON: School, on this ferryboat. And then from there, then they assigned me back to New Orleans, and I was stationed there on what they call, a place called the Industrial Canal. It was just a little base that they had there. And I was only there a couple of weeks, and I was in New Orleans. I love New Orleans. And then I was assigned to an LST, which is a three hundred and twenty-seven foot landing craft, LST meaning Large Shipped Tanks. It's for, landing tanks. So then we loaded up with all our cargo, and we went from New Orleans down the Mississippi River, across the Gulf of Mexico, through the Panama Canal, through Balboa, which is on the Pacific side. Went across the Pacific, and our first port of call was Bora Bora. Now, doesn't that sound romantic. Doesn't that sound romantic? It wasn't. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: It wasn't. What was it?

DICKSON: It was just an island, you know what I mean. That was just a place where we could get water, fresh water, and things of that nature. But it wasn't, you know. That's where, that was my first, you know, scene that

the tropical islands, I guess it was. From there we went to New Caledonia, which belonged to the French there. We stayed there just overnight. Then from there we kept on going. We went into, down the Great Barrier Reef off of Australia, and we went into Brisbane, Australia. We were there for a few days and saw Brisbane a little bit. From there we went up, we went back on the board, back through the Great Barrier Reef where all the coral is and all that type of thing, and we went up to New Guinea. The port of entry was Milne Bay. And from there on in it was just hopping from one invasion spot to the other, something like eleven of them all shipped in a convoy. You know, we would take on the marines, or the army and all the Australians or whatever, and we'd take them up the coast, and we'd land them and put all the supplies ashore for them. Kept on doing this up, all the way up from Milne Bay, Finschhafen, Lae, Selamandra, Helandia, Admiralty Islands. And Manus Island, Sansapor, Biak. And then I was sent home.

LEVINE: So you were, the ship that you were on was transporting both personnel and . . .

DICKSON: And material. If you could visualize it, it had huge

doors that would open up, and a big ramp that would fall down. And then on that ship they would have tanks, trucks, and they would all run, all the material would be taken off. Then we had an elevator.

We had them all on the top of the ship. Then the elevator would bring them down and take them all across, and that's the way. And then we had, then we'd have quarters for soldiers, marines, or the Australians, and we'd put them ashore. And just before the Invasion of the Philippines, I was sent home. And I literally hitchhiked from New Guinea to the United States. And how we did that was they gave me, because I was the senior man, they gave me the orders, and also the personnel records of ten other men, and we hitchhiked. We'd go out to the airport in New Guinea, and we'd say, "Who's going east?" And we found a marine pilot, plane that was going east. We'd go so far, we'd got the Guadalcanal. We had to stay there for a while, and then we got another navy plane that was going east, and we hitched a ride to that. So we got into San Francisco. We went to Hawaii, and then into San Francisco.

LEVINE: What was your rank at that point?

DICKSON: I was Electrician First. And then when we got to San Francisco they gave me thirty days' leave and I went home, and then after I went home I came back to San Francisco. I stationed there for a couple of months.

San Francisco is a lovely town. Then they shipped me to the East Coast, and they shipped me to a base on Tenth Avenue around twenty-some-odd, 26th Street. There's big apartment houses right there now, a sort of housing project. And I was there for about three or four weeks. And then I was sent up to Boston, and I was sent aboard the Coast Guard ship "Mohave," which was a two hundred and forty-seven foot craft, a big boat, a big, old, built in 1921. And from Boston they would take, we would do convoy duty from there up to Newfoundland, and from Newfoundland to Greenland, mostly icebergs and things of that nature. And then the war ended, and then I was able to get out in October the 31st, 1945.

LEVINE: So you actually, the war kind of ended right when your, four-year stint was up.

DICKSON: Just about, yeah. Just about, just about, it ended. So I was lucky.

LEVINE: Well, how do you feel about your military service, in retrospect?

DICKSON: In retrospect, I tell you. I never really got, I never got hurt, and it was a tremendous experience. I mean, you go more places and see more things. How often would I get to Australia to see the Great Barrier Reef, see San Francisco, see New Orleans, the way I did? You know, it's really an adventure. And it's nice that I met a lot of nice guys there. In fact, I was writing to a man out in California, Lou Sutton, because we were together and he and I communicated once in a while.

LEVINE: Okay. So then when you were discharged, then you went back to Brooklyn?

DICKSON: Yes, I went back to Brooklyn, and by that time my mom had passed away and it was just my dad. By that time I had a sister, Rosemary. And I came out, and then I got a job with the New York Telephone Company, and then, of course, I met my wife Virginia, and thank God everything turned out very well.

LEVINE: What is Virginia's maiden name?

DICKSON: Doster, D-O-S-T-E-R. She is from a family, her mother's side of the family could have been, I guess Virginia, too, can be part of the Daughters of the American Revolution. They've been here a long, long time. And just a little anecdote, we went up to Cooperstown here a couple of years ago and one of her uncles is in the Hall of Fame up there, you know, Cooperstown Hall of Fame. His name was, ( he laughs ) Start. His name was Start. He was a pitcher. He played for Pawtucket in Rhode Island.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you have children?

DICKSON: We have two children. Our daughter is forty-three, Barbara. And she lives down in Lexington, Virginia with our grandson and her family. And our son is married and lives a few towns from, in Oradell. He's a vice president from Barclays Bank.

LEVINE: And what's your son's name?

DICKSON: Donald.

LEVINE: Donald. And your daughter's married name?

DICKSON: Uh, now what's the guy, Henkel. ( they laugh ) I'm terrible with names, yeah. Henkel.

LEVINE: Okay. So, and you have grand, you have . . .

DICKSON: A grandchild, yeah.

LEVINE: One grandchild, great. Okay. Well, we're getting close to the end of time, but is there anything that you would say about this phase of your life?

DICKSON: Prior, you mean after . . .

LEVINE: You retired, and . . .

DICKSON: Oh, God, yes, lovely. I retired in February the 12th 1983, and I don't know how we took care of the house prior to that, because I never have time to do anything. Because you've got to play golf, and we belong to a senior citizen's group. We go to Wildwood. We go to Atlantic City, or we go to day trips here, there and everywhere. You know, there seems to be a lot of activity. Don't ask me what we do, but it's busy. I recommend it for everybody.

LEVINE: ( she laughs ) And is there anything else that you'd like to say before we close?

DICKSON: I don't think so. I hope there is some value in what, that you're getting out of this. I know I've been

talking in a blue streak here, but I hope there's some value to it.

LEVINE: There definitely is, and I want to thank you very much. I've been speaking with Arthur Dickson, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's June 30th, 1993, and I'm signing off.