

EI-040

RALPH HORNBERGER

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COAST GUARDSMAN AT ELLIS ISLAND

12/1951 THROUGH 3/1954

Oral Historian's Note: A tremendous thunderstorm ensued about half way through this interview and much extraneous background noise is created by this throughout the entirety of side two of the recording. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 7/5/1993.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist with the National Park Service. Brian Feeney and I are here with Mr. Ralph Hornberger, who was stationed in the Coast Guard at Ellis Island from December 1951 until March of '54. Today is Wednesday, April 24th. It is about three o'clock in the afternoon, and we're here in Trivos, Pennsylvania, at Mr. Hornberger's home. Mr. Hornberger, could you please give your full name and your date of birth, please?

HORNBERGER: My name is Ralph Hornberger. I was born July 20th, July 14th, 1929. My address is K-13 Linden Avenue, 2304 Brownsville Road, Trivos, Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: I see. Where were you born?

HORNBERGER: I was born upstate Pennsylvania in a little town called Mount Carmel.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me just a little bit about your parents?

HORNBERGER: Well, my parents are, for the most part, country folk. Shortly after I was born, we moved out into the country and that was my home for, well, up until I went into college and then into the Coast Guard. What can I say about them?

SIGRIST: What did your father do for a living?

HORNBERGER: My father worked, first of all, in the coalery, in the coal coalery. My mother was just a housewife. And then in his later years Dad worked in the canning factory, also at McGee Carpet Company, Bloomsburg, which is a, quite a well-known carpet company.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you come from a big family?

HORNBERGER: No, I have only one sister.

SIGRIST: I see. Why did you go into the Coast Guard?

HORNBERGER: I went into the Coast Guard because I realized that I was going to be drafted. I was of draft age and I had a choice, did I want to wait until I was called or did I want to

select where I wanted to go. I had a neighbor who had been in the Coast Guard. He said, "Ralph," he says, "the Coast Guard's a good life." He says, "You'll like it there, and it's a whole lot better than if you go into the army." So I chose the Coast Guard.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you tell us a little bit about how, what was the sign-up process? Where did you go to join the Coast Guard?

HORNBERGER: I had to travel quite a little ways. I went to Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, north of Bloomsburg about, oh, I guess about twenty, twenty-five miles.

SIGRIST: Did you say Wilkes Barre?

HORNBERGER: Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. And, as I recall, there wasn't really much to it. When you enlist they're ready to take you, and it was just a matter of filling out a few questions and their letting me know when I was to be inducted.

SIGRIST: Were there other people with you who were enlisting?

HORNBERGER: Not the day that I went in necessarily. That is, I didn't go with others. When I arrived there there were others, too, I guess, that were inquiring about and possibly deciding

that they, too, wanted to join up. But it wasn't as if I were a part of a group.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

HORNBERGER: Well, let's see. Can we figure back? I was born in '29, and I went in the Coast Guard '51. So that's about twenty-two years old.

SIGRIST: I see. Had you gone to college?

HORNBERGER: I'd gone to college, yes. Yes, in fact I had completed college. In fact, I tried to defer my going into the service by a year, and I went back to college for an additional year's work. But eventually they more or less caught up to me and I had to decide what branch of service I wanted to go into.

SIGRIST: I see. When you went to sign up, did you have to undergo any physical examinations?

HORNBERGER: Not that I recall. Now, I had a physical, it may have been prior to, I don't really recall. I know I had a physical, but as to whether it was prior to or shortly thereafter I can't be certain.

SIGRIST: Where was your first station? Where did they first send you?

HORNBERGER: Well, my recruitment was in Cape May. That was the famous eastern coast part of the Coast Guard.

SIGRIST: This is the equivalent of boot camp?

HORNBERGER: Yes. Boot camp for a three-month period.

SIGRIST: Could you just briefly describe what that entails?

HORNBERGER: Well, boot camp was just a conglomeration of things, really. At that time, since we were not involved in, directly in war, that is, the Coast Guard wasn't, it was kind of light training. It wasn't much involved other than just following orders, some marching, daily chores, cleanup things. It wasn't much in the way of training, I didn't think. We had a few classes that related to living, shall we say, on board ship. But as I look back on it, I can remember I guess one or two days when we're on the artillery range, gunnery range I guess they call it. One or two days when we fooled around with tying knots. One or two days when we were given some instruction in the lifeboat. But there really wasn't much to it. (he laughs) It was just really light duty.

SIGRIST: How long were you at Cape May?

HORNBERGER: I was at Cape May three months.

FEENEY: Did you go for advanced training after basic at Cape May?

HORNBERGER: No, no. From Cape May, then I was transferred to St. George, Staten Island for two days. And then our company split up, and I guess hardly any of us really knew which direction we were going in. Some of the fellows were saying, "Well, I sure would like to get out on a ship. That's more of a type of life that I would prefer." And I was the one who said, "Boy, I don't think I could take life aboard ship. I hope I'm a landlubber." And two days later, then, we were told, a number of us were told, "Get in the boat." (he laughs) We didn't know, still, where we were going. At least I didn't. Then we got into a small boat, and we went across New York Harbor, past the Statue of Liberty, the first time I had ever seen it. We arrived at Ellis Island. And then I knew where I was going to be.

SIGRIST: And what was the date?

HORNBERGER: That was December 29, 1951.

SIGRIST: I see. How did you feel when you arrived at Ellis Island?

HORNBERGER: Well, I guess there was just an aura of mystery

about the thing. I didn't really know what to expect. I didn't know what kind of facilities were there, nor how long I was going to be there. It was just a matter of going along with the tide, so to speak, whatever would befall me I was more or less ready to accept. Kind of young and somewhat eager, and it was just really an adventure.

SIGRIST: Did Ellis Island have any kind of meaning to you as an immigration station?

HORNBERGER: Just vaguely. I don't recall that I had had any background information, but I'm pretty sure I was aware at that time that it was an immigration center.

SIGRIST: And how many of the small corps of people were there?

HORNBERGER: (he sighs) Well, if you're asking about how many went across in the boat that day, I guess it was just a handful, maybe ten, twelve of us. But when we arrived there was already a contingent of men there. But it was a relatively new opening for the Coast Guard, so that in total, well, I would only be giving an estimate of maybe sixty, seventy personnel.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your rank while you were at Ellis?

HORNBERGER: I was a seaman the entire time I was there. I was

given a job, shortly after I arrived I was given a job to work in what was then called a ship's store. It used to bother me to say it was a ship's store. I wasn't aboard a ship. But at any rate there was no ranking for that type of work. So if you wanted that kind of job you knew that you wouldn't be elevated in rank and you stayed a seaman, but you had that job, and it was sort of a security-type thing, and I accepted it.

SIGRIST: Tell me about that job. Where was the ship's store at Ellis?

HORNBERGER: The ship's store was in a separate building which I referred to as a gymnasium/auditorium. And in the rear of that building there were a number of rooms, and it was there that we established the store. When I first arrived, as I said, the island was more or less just opening up to the Coast Guard, and they had not yet established a store. One evening I walked into the, I think they referred to it as the operations room, and that room was in somewhat disorder. Desks had been moved in, but not necessarily placed. And a young man, an ensign, was talking to someone else. And I went in there merely to look up my record. And while I was there we entered into a little conversation. And when the ensign found out that I had had college experience, that I was a college graduate, he literally jumped off the desk that he was half-reclining on, and he said,

"I can use you." Well, I didn't know at that time just how he was going to use me, but he soon shared with me. He said, "Ralph, I intend to open up a store." And he says, "I need someone to be an assistant." And he said, "Would you like the job?" Or words to that affect. And he and I together opened up that store.

SIGRIST: And what did you sell in the store?

HORNBERGER: In the store we sold most of the items that fellows would want in the way of just handy articles, soap, toothpaste, cigarettes, just immediate necessities. And then we enlarged upon it. We finally got clothing and shoes and jewelry, watches and food. By food I mean crackers, most of the items that they could use just on a day-to-day basis.

SIGRIST: Was it only the Coast Guard people who were using this store, or did other people who were involved at Ellis?

HORNBERGER: No, and that's a good question because this gives rise to a little association, then, with the immigration center. Our store was open to the immigration side of the island. And regularly people, mostly people who worked there that were employed on the island, would come over to the store. And I think it was Friday they had payday, and then they would line up, because there were many of them that came over from

immigration side. They would line up and for the most part they would buy cigarettes. That was the big item that we sold. But no, we, the Coast Guard shared it with immigration.

FEENEY: You say the immigration side of the island. How was it divided? Was immigration on the north side and you were on the south side, or vice versa?

HORNBERGER: Well, when I say it's divided, certainly it's not two distinct islands. The immigration building was opposite the ferry slip from the Coast Guard. That is, the ferry slip was in between the Coast Guard buildings and the immigration building, or shall we say side, on either side of the ferry slip.

FEENEY: So the, you mean the immigration process at that point was taking place in the main building, the large building on Ellis Island, and you were on the other side of the island?

HORNBERGER: Yes, yes. As to what was happening over in the immigration section, I don't know. I can recall only one occasion that I went over there, and I think it was a tour of any of the Coast Guard men that wanted to go over, since we were that close to it, and it was just a little something extra for us. But, of course, I don't know what was happening there, in that section of the island.

FEENEY: And the ship's store you say, you set it up in what was a large recreation hall and it was a separate building.

HORNBERGER: Yes.

FEENEY: So you believe it was the building that we to this day refer to as the rec hall, near the hospitals?

HORNBERGER: Yes, definitely it was, yes.

SIGRIST: Did it have an exterior entrance, or did you have to go through the rec hall to get to the . . .

HORNBERGER: Well, it had an exterior back entrance right at back of the office to our store, but aside from that there was only, the main entrance was in through that covered corridor that connected parts of the building, connected the buildings.

SIGRIST: What was going on in the rec hall?

HORNBERGER: The rec hall wasn't used very much. In the daytime it wasn't used at all, but in the night time they set up chairs and this is where they showed movies.

SIGRIST: That's pretty much all that went on there.

HORNBERGER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember watching movies there?

HORNBERGER: I myself didn't watch movies a whole lot but, yes, it was a nightly affair. Then, on occasion, there were a few times when a service organization would come over to entertain the troops, and it was more or less some of these quiz show type of activities. And I recall rather distinctly one group that came over, and I don't remember the name of it, but they asked for volunteers, and I was ready. I volunteered, went up stage, and it was, as I say, a sort of a quiz type of a program. And I was asked a question to which I didn't know the answer. And the question was what noted lady had just recently travelled from the United States over to Europe? When I was in the Coast Guard I wasn't following news. So I hesitated to give an answer because I just didn't know. But before I had a chance even to say I don't know, one of the personnel from the quiz show walked behind me and whispered the answer to me. (he laughs) And I said, "Mrs. Roosevelt." For which I was given a prize of I think around seventy dollars, if I'm not mistaken. But this didn't happen very often, that is, as far as a service organization coming in and putting on a show, but it did happen on occasion.

SIGRIST: What kind of seating did they have in the rec hall? Were they fixed seats, or were they folding chairs?

HORNBERGER: Well, it's funny that I don't really remember, but I'm almost certain it was, they weren't fixed seats, that I know. I'm pretty sure they were just folding chairs. I can't recall taking up those chairs and putting them aside, though. But as far as I can recall, that's the type of seating it was.

SIGRIST: I want to ask you a question about the tour to the immigration building. Who conducted the tour?

HORNBERGER: I no longer know.

SIGRIST: But what organization? Do you know who was in charge of that?

HORNBERGER: Nope. I would, this would be only conjecture. I would say possibly an ensign took us over.

SIGRIST: But someone from the Coast Guard?

HORNBERGER: Yes, yes. I imagine maybe just on invitation from the immigration.

SIGRIST: What did they show you over in the main building?

HORNBERGER: That's so vague in my mind that I don't think I can recall even one thing. I think, the only impression that I got was the immensity of the building. And we were not taken on a detail tour, so I have very little information for you on that.

FEENEY: So for the most part you say the Coast Guard did not have very much to do with the immigration side of the island. You had no security duties or maintenance duties for the island, or anything like that?

HORNBERGER: That's right. We had no connection with the immigration.

FEENEY: What about with the hospitals? Now, you say you were, you know, in the rec hall, which is in the area that we call Island Two, so you're on the south side of the island there, and of course the hospitals, I assume, were still operating at that point?

HORNBERGER: No. When we speak of the hospital, my understanding, and this information I think I have correct, is that prior to the Coast Guard coming, it was a Marine hospital. The Marines had had it. They abandoned it, gave it up, whatever, and it was then available for whoever wanted, and the Coast Guard decided that this was a good place for them to have a station, so the Coast Guard came in. And once the Coast Guard was established, there was no further use of those buildings as a hospital. They were used as barracks for the men's station there.

FEENEY: And that would be both the hospital wing, which we call Island Two, and then the old contagious disease wards, the far south side of the island, what would be called Island Three. You say there were no medical facilities there operating at that point, and it was purely a Coast Guard area?

HORNBERGER: As far as the third part of the island, I had no knowledge of that with one exception, and that is the people who were in charge of the island, whether he was called a governor or not, I'm not sure. But he had his residence over there in that area, and I do know that some of my buddies were invited to his house just for an evening, a social evening. I was never invited. But I hardly knew that that section of the island existed because it was not a part of a the Coast Guard function.

FEENEY: What we call Island Three, the contagious disease wards.

HORNBERGER: Right. I have no knowledge of that except from what I just told you.

FEENEY: Do you have any idea who was operating Island Three then?

HORNBERGER: I cannot tell you.

SIGRIST: Where did you stay on the island?

HORNBERGER: Well, we were in the island. We were in these buildings that you're referring to as the former Marine Hospital. And the rooms that were used, I suppose, as wards, then, for the Marines, became barracks for the Coast Guard men.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the barrack that you were in?

HORNBERGER: Just a large room, a large bedroom, shall we call it, with many double-tiered bunks, and it was almost exclusively filled up with bunks.

SIGRIST: How many men stayed in this one?

HORNBERGER: Oh, fifty perhaps. Forty, fifty.

SIGRIST: Was there a bathroom adjacent to this?

HORNBERGER: Yes, yes. Across the hallway there was a bathroom.

SIGRIST: And where did you eat?

HORNBERGER: That was just, excuse me. That was just one room that I'm describing, but there were many such. We ate in the basement of one of the buildings, I suppose the main center building. That was the commissary, the kitchen, and the room for, for eating.

FEENEY: Could it have been on the second floor of that

center building?

HORNBERGER: No, no. This was the basement, as I recall, yes.

FEENEY: And there was a kind of a kitchen/dining room area on the second floor. Could that have been for officers, maybe?

HORNBERGER: That would be my guess, but I don't really know.

SIGRIST: What sorts of things did they feed you?

HORNBERGER: I was kind of afraid you would ask me that. I'm a, (he laughs) I'm very selective when it comes to eating and I didn't enjoy everything that they had. One thing that I do recall is we had beans quite regularly, and I didn't care for beans. We had potatoes about every second or third day. I didn't care for their potatoes. There were times when I went in chow line and I couldn't see anything that appealed to me until I got to the end. I was hoping that there would be ice cream, and many times there was ice cream. I'd fill up with a bowl of ice cream and that was my meal. But beans and potatoes, I remember, and I guess spaghetti, at times. But aside from that I don't have any clear recollection.

SIGRIST: At holiday times did they offer you special food?

HORNBERGER: Holiday times didn't seem to be much more special

than any other times.

SIGRIST: I see. Uh, one thing I do want you to do is, if you can, to list your commanding officers. Who was the head of the Coast Guard at Ellis?

HORNBERGER: Expecting that you would ask me that question prior to your coming here, I was looking up some of my old records and I said surely on my discharge papers there should be the name of the commanding officer. Not so. The only name, I have two names. One was the payroll clerk. His name was Maukert, M-A-U-K-E-R-T. The other was the personnel officer whose name was Hutchinson. And I cannot remember who the old man was. I just don't remember his name. I remember going in his office one time. He had called our store and wanted me to bring some shirts, as I recall, up to his office, up to his room, actually. I got up there, opened the door, and I almost had to say, "Excuse me." He was in his civvies. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you end up doing that a lot, making house calls to people's rooms and that sort of thing?

HORNBERGER: No, no. Because the few items that we had, the few clothing items that we had were bought up principally by the recruits, the men in the Coast Guard. We also had another store where clothing was sold exclusively and that was run by another

individual. Now, the captain and the commanding officers, they probably went to see him more often than they came to see us.

FEENEY: You, of course, were involved in the running of the ship's store, but the Coast Guard was a whole, what was it doing at Ellis Island at that time?

HORNBERGER: The main function of the Coast Guard there on Ellis Island was to guard the piers of New York in Hoboken, Jersey City. And I was a little, I had a little tour of duty for four months doing that kind of thing where we would go out in forty-foot boats, and they would land us on some of these piers, and we were there for, I think it was a stint of close to five or six hours, usually two or three men. In the day time, we had to make certain that all the people that came onto the piers to work were bona fide people.

FEENEY: What were you looking for at that point? What were they afraid of?

HORNBERGER: Well, I don't, I didn't really know too much what I was looking for, but I think it was being cautious about sabotage. And I don't recall any incidents that happened during this time that I was in the Coast Guard, but it was a precautionary type of thing. It was making certain that the people who worked on these piers were not going to sabotage

anything in the New York Harbor.

SIGRIST: How many of you went at a time?

HORNBERGER: Oh, on the boat I guess we may have taken out a dozen men or so, and then we were dropped off three or four places. Because usually there were only two, two or three men at any one designated spot.

SIGRIST: What kind of boat shuttled you back and forth?

HORNBERGER: These were what we call the forty-foot boats.

SIGRIST: Could you describe one for us, please?

HORNBERGER: Not too well, because first of all I don't do well at describing things. A forty-footer means it's forty feet long. There was a small cabin, and one fellow would operate the boat, and there was room for the rest of us on it, and I don't know how to really describe it. I'd say it was a typical Coast Guard boat.

FEENEY: Were there a lot of Coast Guard vessels going in and out of Ellis Island at the time?

HORNBERGER: It was quite a busy place, I would say. Not that there were that many, and I guess because of the fact that that, there weren't very many, was the reason that we had such a

steady traffic. Because a group would go out every six hours and the different boats would go in different directions to guard different sections of New York Harbor. And, then when they came back, shortly thereafter there were others going out.

And then beside that we had some larger boats there. But there was a pretty steady stream of traffic moving in and out.

SIGRIST: Where were the boats docked on the island?

HORNBERGER: They were docked right there in that ferry slip on the Coast Guard side of the ferry slip.

SIGRIST: So there would be multiple boats docked.

HORNBERGER: Yes, oh, yes.

FEENEY: Did you ever ride the ferry boat "Ellis Island?"

HORNBERGER: Quite a bit, you bet.

FEENEY: Was it like, can you describe that boat for us?

HORNBERGER: It wasn't anything entirely exciting, I would say.

It was a typical old-fashioned ferry boat. I think there was a second deck on these boats, and it was just a matter of conveyance, you know, back and forth between Manhattan Island and the Coast Guard or the immigration.

FEENEY: Did it run frequently?

HORNBERGER: Yes, but how often I'm not able to tell you. I'm going to hazard a guess about every two hours, and the reason I think I'm safe to say that is because for those fellows who would miss it, they needn't fear that they would be stranded for any lengthy period of time. There'd be another one coming across within, like I say, about two hours, I would guess.

SIGRIST: Did it run all night?

HORNBERGER: No, no. I'm thinking it was eleven o'clock. If I recall correctly, about eleven o'clock I think was the last one back to the island for that day.

FEENEY: Did immigrants leave Ellis Island aboard that vessel? Did you ever ride that boat with immigrants who had been processed?

HORNBERGER: I don't know who I rubbed elbows with. It was very possible because we saw some, well, can we call them strange individuals? Not necessarily strange, but you sort of sensed that they felt strange. But insofar as were they really immigrants, I can't be certain. We, the Coast Guard fellows didn't necessarily communicate with them that much to determine that. And many times when we went out, it was pretty much Coast

Guard fellows were going across on the ferry. It was almost as if they ran a ferry just for the Coast Guard.

SIGRIST: Under what, (deferring to Mr. Feeney) I'm sorry, go ahead.

FEENEY: But it was the immigration service that was running the ferry at that point, correct?

HORNBERGER: I would guess so. As far as I know, yes.

SIGRIST: Under what circumstances would you be riding the ferry? Why would you be going into Manhattan?

HORNBERGER: Well, this was our, what we call our liberty. When we were no longer assigned to duty we had X number of hours, during which time we could either go across to the main island, or we could just spend our spare time there in the Coast Guard headquarters, in the Coast Guard area. But most of the fellows, when they had free time, they wanted to get away from anything that smacked of Coast Guard duties and so they were ready to see the sights of the town. And one interesting aspect, just from my own viewpoint, is I must have been there, I would hazard over a month, maybe two months, before I got up enough nerve to decide to go over to this strange place called New York City. It was a place that I guess I felt maybe I'd get lost. Having

been brought up in the country, I didn't have much knowledge of large towns, and especially such a large one like New York. And then foolishly, when I did get up enough nerve to go, I went by myself. Got over in the, I guess they call it the trade section, downtown Manhattan. I forget what name was given to that area. I'm not speaking just of the Bowery, but Wall Street, I guess is what I'm thinking of. Got over there and looking up at these tall buildings, walking around by myself. And I did manage to get lost for a short period of time, but I didn't really go up into the city, so to speak. I just went over out of curiosity. That was my first visit. And I had enough of it then. Later on with some of my friends, and I would go to places like Carnegie Hall. That was one place in particular that I liked. And another place where there were, uh, quiz shows and musical type of shows that I preferred.

SIGRIST: Did you have to wear your uniform when you were on leave?

HORNBERGER: Definitely, yes.

SIGRIST: Dress uniform?

HORNBERGER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What did that entail? What was your dress uniform

like?

HORNBERGER: Well, in the summertime it was white, and in the wintertime it was gold or it was just our navy blues.

SIGRIST: How did you go about obtaining leave?

HORNBERGER: That was certainly no rigorous thing at all. It was a part of the schedule that was built in to the recreation time for the men, and the officers knew that the men would want to go. And so it was part of the daily schedule, actually. And when you were off duty, and this was true of almost all the men that just had their shift during the day time. Now, when I worked in the canteen, I had to work at night, too, so this was not true of me necessarily, but for most of the fellows they had liberty just about every night, and this was their recreation time. So there wasn't anything rigorous about applying for liberty. You just went in to see one of the officers, and there were hardly any questions asked. Now, if you were a, kind of a misfit or a troublemaker, then perhaps the questioning may have been a little more grueling and perhaps at times there were those who were denied that privilege. But I think the commanding officers and those in charge, they realized that this was important to the men, so there was a steady stream of Coast Guard men going each evening on liberty and then coming

back at night time.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Denying leave was a way of punishing?

HORNBERGER: Oh, yes. Oh, definitely, yes.

SIGRIST: What were they being punished for? I mean, what would be considered a misdemeanor in the Coast Guard?

HORNBERGER: Well, now that you put it that way, I don't know that I can name any particular thing, but I guess it was just a matter of being a little reluctant, perhaps in following some instructions or orders or, uh, just being a little contrary, perhaps, at times. But since that was not my situation, I just can't elaborate on it.

FEENEY: Just to touch briefly again on the ferry boat "Ellis Island." You say it went to Manhattan . . .

HORNBERGER: Yes.

FEENEY: On a fairly regular schedule. Did it ever go to New Jersey?

HORNBERGER: No.

FEENEY: It was strictly, and where did it land in Manhattan?

HORNBERGER: In Manhattan, compared to where we embark and disembark when I was up just the other day, the ferry slips on Manhattan were between the present place of embarkation and the south side area that you spoke of earlier. Again, I can't think of the name of it. Seaport? Or . . .

SIGRIST: Yes, the South Street Seaport.

HORNBERGER: Yes.

FEENEY: It would have been, probably have been the Fulton Fish Market, that area there.

HORNBERGER: Well, I, by name I can't tell you, but I do remember just the other day driving past that en route to the south side seaport. And I said, "Oh, there are the ferry slips that we used." So the buildings are still standing, that it was, you could go inside these buildings. There was a sheltered area there. And then they had, at the water edge of these buildings was, would be the ferry slip.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what color the ferry was?

HORNBERGER: No. Some drab color. (he laughs) I can't

really be sure.

FEENEY: Was it green, by any chance?

HORNBERGER: (he laughs) It was probably green from age. No, I, no. They weren't nearly as attractive as the ones that they have now. It was just some drab color, gray, brown, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: When you said that you worked at the canteen, do you mean the store?

HORNBERGER: Yes. This was another name. Ship's Service Store Canteen.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you, did you ever go over to the Statue of Liberty at all, when you were at Ellis Island?

HORNBERGER: No. No, we were so close to it, but since there was no direct way of getting there, unless you wanted to swim, I didn't have any desire to go. To me the impressive part of the Statue is seeing it from the outside, and it was there for me to see any day, any night that I wanted to, and I often remarked that I was so close to the Statue that she shown her light down upon me every night, so to speak, when I went to bed. No, it was, well, I was going to say years later, and I think this is true, that it was years later that I actually went back on a

visit to New York and decided I'm going across to this Statue, which was so close to me while I was in the Coast Guard, but never had gone, and actually we3nt on to the island and went inside. But no, while I was in the Coast Guard I did not visit.

SIGRIST: Were cars allowed on Ellis Island?

HORNBERGER: No cars, to my recollection. (he pauses) I was thinking that there were cars that came across on the boat, but I think I'm wrong. I think that was the Staten Island Ferry I was thinking of, not on the Ellis Island ferry.

SIGRIST: I see. I wanted to ask you a little bit about, um, about, I just lost my train of thought. Can you describe the island itself a little bit? For instance, were there gardens on the island? Were there, was there any kind of recreational facilities on the island, such as like a ballfield or tennis courts or something along those lines?

HORNBERGER: You'll recall that I had said that when I got to the island it was a relatively new venture for the Coast Guard. They were more or less just initiating things, and this is why the store itself was something that was just going to be started. So no, insofar as flowers and flowering trees and that type of natural beauty, I can't recall there was anything there. Insofar as recreation I faintly recall one little area that was

set aside for us. I remember just one tennis court. I was not a tennis player, but someone encouraged me one day to come out and see what we could do. We batted the ball around a little. We did have one baseball diamond, but there was no fixed backstop. There was just an open area where we played ball. The other day when I was there I recognized that particular area which was, shall we say, in the back of the Coast Guard buildings.

SIGRIST: I see. Did the Coast Guard, among the members of the Coast Guard, did you ever play softball against each other, or . . .

HORNBERGER: We played softball. I was trying to recall if we actually played competitive teams, but I don't think we were organized that way then. I suppose maybe I'm thinking of boot camp when we were more or less organizing the teams. But yes, there was baseball there and quoits too, I believe. But nothing too organized in the way of competitive sports.

FEENEY: At that point, the Coast Guard was not at Governor's Island. That was still the army, right?

HORNBERGER: I don't really know, Brian.

FEENEY: But in terms of guarding the piers and things like

that on the Hudson, it was really done exclusively by details from Ellis Island.

HORNBERGER: As far as I know, yes, yes. That was our main function.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed guests onto the island?

HORNBERGER: No.

SIGRIST: Nobody could come.

HORNBERGER: No, I had my Dad come to New York, but he only got to see Ellis Island from the ferry. And I had my wife there shortly after we were married. She came with, to visit with me one weekend, and it was similar in that respect too, that they were not allowed onto the island.

FEENEY: Was Ellis Island considered a security risk in some way? Were they concerned about maybe sabotage or anything like that at Ellis Island?

HORNBERGER: No, I don't think I had ever heard anything said about that, no.

FEENEY: Was it considered a high security post in some way because it had the immigration function and the Coast Guard function?

HORNBERGER: No. I think they simply relied on the, as far as security was concerned, just relied on the fact that there was water between the island and the mainland, but I had never heard anyone refer to it as a security risk, no.

SIGRIST: Did you ever remember them dredging the ferry slip or maintaining the sea wall or anything like that?

HORNBERGER: No, there was no work done there when I was there.

SIGRIST: I wanted to ask you about your wife because I believe you said you married her while you were at Ellis. Tell me a little bit about how you met your wife and how you left Ellis to marry her, and when you came back, how long you were gone, that sort of thing.

HORNBERGER: Well, I got acquainted with my wife when I was attending college in Bloomsburg. And she knew that I was going to be going into the service, and she was certainly not against that. But it was while I was in service that we decided we would get married, and we were married in 1953. At that time I didn't realize that I was going to get an early out of the Coast Guard. I had signed up for three years' duty, five years' reserve, but I was in the Coast Guard two-and-a-half years. At that time the Coast Guard came through with a plan whereby they

were going to allow X number of men to be discharged six months early, and they had their reasons for that. Budget, I think, was tight at that time, for one reason. So we were married in June of '53, and it was in the spring of '54 that I was discharged. But I had met her when I was going to college.

SIGRIST: How long were you given leave? How long was your leave when you went to get married?

HORNBERGER: I don't know for certain, but it was very close to a month. I would say four weeks, as I recall.

SIGRIST: Did your colleagues in the Coast Guard throw you a party of some sort, or . . .

HORNBERGER: No, maybe I didn't talk about it enough. (he laughs) No party. No, I went, I left single and came back married.

SIGRIST: I did want to ask you, actually, about some of the other people that you were stationed with. For instance, perhaps one or two of them stick out in your mind. Maybe there was a real prankster or somebody that you served with there, and I was just hoping you would talk about that a little bit.

HORNBERGER: Very definitely, since you said a prankster. (he laughs) That's comical because there were a number of fellows

in the Coast Guard who, although they enlisted, because this was, these men were entirely, exclusively enlisted men, there were still some who found it difficult to follow orders and they got themselves in trouble by just being disobedient. For some reason I guess maybe they didn't like their duty or whatever it was. They were kind of disenchanted. So they were uncooperative, and as a result they had to come up before the mast, so to speak. They had to come before the captain on occasion, and depending upon the seriousness of their misdemeanor. But at any rate there were a number, and I can think of one fellow, whose name I won't remember. But to me he seemed like an extra special nice fellow. He didn't appear to be a rough guy at all. I think he was disenchanted to the point where he felt he did not want to cooperate. But insofar as his fellow man he was as nice as can be, and I wish I would remember his name. But his crime, whatever it was, was fairly serious because I think they had some authorities in on his situation, his case. But then there were some others, too. And again I don't recall names of fellows who from time to time were in trouble for one reason or another.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the pranks, or any of these . . .

HORNBERGER: No, I don't know what they did. I had a buddy who

had a special job in the Coast Guard. He was a secretarial recorder, I'm going to call it. Now, that probably was not the name that was given to him, but he had a manual dictating machine that he used in these court trials that they had there on the island. I call them court trials because this is, the way they thought of them, when you had someone that was in trouble, had broken the Coast Guard law or whatever it was, then he had to come up before the captain and they had sort of a trial, and one of my buddies was the man who recorded all this.

And I guess he was sworn to not share, because if there was anyone that I would want to talk about he would, of course, be a prime source, but we never discussed these things. (he coughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember where that courtroom was?

HORNBERGER: Uh, the so-called courtroom must have been in one of the main rooms there close to where the captain had his office.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go in it? (break in tape)

SIGRIST: Mr. Hornberger, what was the general condition of the island when you were there? Was everything well-maintained, or had already things begun to crumble and were sort of ill-maintained?

HORNBERGER: No. When I was there the condition of the buildings I thought was real good. Of course, the Marines had been there. When the Coast Guard came in, just like anybody moving into a new house, you've got to change things around and perhaps if something was painted pink and you wanted blue, that kind of thing. So there was some paint scraping and painting of walls, that type of thing. But the overall condition, and this includes the barracks and down in the basement area, I thought it was real good shape.

SIGRIST: Was the Coast Guard responsible for maintaining its buildings and its grounds, or was there a whole maintenance crew, a civilian maintenance crew that took care of all of that?

HORNBERGER: No, this was exclusively the Coast Guard's work, or responsibility, yeah.

SIGRIST: And just as you worked in the ship's store, did other members of the Coast Guard do building maintenance as their duty?

HORNBERGER: Yes. Yes, there was some of that, but again I come back to the main function being the guarding of the piers. So it was pier duty that most of the fellows had while they were there. But some of the other work that was necessary was the

maintenance, yes. And there were fellows who were designated for that kind of work. One of my buddies was a mailman. That was his job. He had a little room which was the mailroom, and he worked out of that. And then there were, some of my friends that worked in the operations room, the communications center. And there were some of the fellows that worked in, as clerks in the main office, the business aspect of the operations there on the island. So there were handfuls of men doing different types of work. Also, this is kind of interesting insofar as immigration is concerned. The Coast Guard and immigration shared the laundry. The laundry was a separate part of the buildings, it was a separate building not too far from the auditorium/gymnasium. And it was connected with other buildings with this long covered tunnel, and the Coast Guard was allowed to use this, I suppose, on a sort of on a rental basis. But this is where some of my friends worked, in the laundry. And I have a photo of those fellows at work there. And a fellow that I referred to a little earlier by name, Gregory, who was our mailman, also worked in the laundry for a while.

SIGRIST: Where was the mailroom?

HORNBERGER: The mailroom was in the basement, very close to the place where we ate chow.

SIGRIST: How often did you receive mail? I guess the question is how often was mail brought to the island?

HORNBERGER: As I recall, we had mail every day if I'm not mistaken, but not the full length of the day. There were certain hours that were scheduled for us to go to the mailroom and see if we had anything there, but I believe it was daily, as I remember.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own mailbox, or was mail read . . .

HORNBERGER: No, no. The number of men on the island wasn't so great that one man could not handle that, and my friend Bill was the mailman, and he just sorted out the mail by name alphabetically and, you know, if we had anything he'd give it to us. If he didn't know the name of the men, of course, it was just alphabetically, he would be able to get it to them, but it was no big deal, actually.

SIGRIST: Was there a library for you on the island?

HORNBERGER: No, no library.

SIGRIST: Brian, do you have any other specific Ellis Island questions?

FEENEY: No, I'm just curious about your discharge. Was it from Ellis Island?

HORNBERGER: Yes, yes. It was March the 9th of '54 and earlier in this interview I had mentioned the fact that the Coast Guard came up with an early out for a number of men. I have a little historical article here that you might be interested in.

SIGRIST: Sure. We can look at it after the interview.

HORNBERGER: And the title is "2,000 Coast Guard Men Get Early Out." And according to what was stipulated in that, I was out six months early, honorable discharge. Came home and surprised people because I didn't tell them.

SIGRIST: Again, before you left Ellis, you weren't the only one being discharged from Ellis.

HORNBERGER: This is true. There were quite a number.

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of a, maybe celebration is the wrong word, but some kind of formal acknowledgement that you were being discharged, a special assembly, perhaps in the rec hall?

HORNBERGER: No. I think it came pretty much as a surprise, and maybe because of that, maybe that was a factor as to why there

wasn't anything formally initiated, but I don't recall any fanfare for our leaving.

FEENEY: Do you recall at that time, around March or so, of '54, when you were being discharged, any talk about closing Ellis Island, closing the entire facility?

HORNBERGER: No, I don't think I remember anything along that line.

FEENEY: So when you left the Coast Guard was maintaining a presence there at Ellis Island.

HORNBERGER: Yes, yes.

FEENEY: They weren't reducing the numbers of men there, specifically.

HORNBERGER: No, sir.

SIGRIST: Well, just tell us very briefly in our few minutes here, where did you go after you left Ellis Island?

HORNBERGER: Well, prior to coming into the service I had graduated from college to be a teacher. So I guess I was home, I'm going to say, a week, perhaps two weeks, before I got a job teaching.

SIGRIST: Where was home?

HORNBERGER: Home was upstate Pennsylvania and my sister-in-law had put in one year of teaching in this area where I live now, Levittown. And she told me, "Ralph, you don't have to wait until the following September for the beginning of a school year." She said, "Teachers are being hired now in the month of March, the beginning of April." And she says, "I don't see any reason why you can't get a job." So it was through her urging that I got a job in the same school system, Pennsbury, where she had been teaching, and this was to finish out two-and-a-half months of that year, '54, I taught elementary school. I had a third grade.

SIGRIST: And did you teach pretty much for the rest of your life in one capacity or another?

HORNBERGER: I've been teaching for over thirty-some years, but never third grade again. I went up into some of the elementary fifth and sixth grade, and then went into the junior high and taught junior high math for quite a few years.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, I want to thank you very much. You've given us a very good picture of a time in Ellis' history that we really don't know a whole lot about, and I appreciate you letting us come down here and picking your brain about the

everyday goings on at Ellis Island.

HORNBERGER: Paul, it was my pleasure that I was able to share with you some of the things I remember. I'm sorry that my mind isn't as clear on some of these details. But, then again, after thirty-some years a person is bound to forget a few things.

SIGRIST: Well, actually you're going to think of all the answers after we leave.

HORNBERGER: I might even think of a few, yes, and I might even think of some questions you should have asked me.

SIGRIST: That's true. That's true. Well, I want to also look forward to looking at the photographs again. I want it on this interview that you do have a number of photographs taken of you and your buddies at Ellis Island, and we'll look at them after we complete the interview.

HORNBERGER: Fine.

SIGRIST: Well, this is Paul Sigrist. On behalf of the National Park Service, and on behalf of Brian Feeney, signing off.