

**EI-409**

**DAVID HADDEN CASSELLS**

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**COAST GUARD AT ELLIS ISLAND  
1943**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with David Cassells, who was in the Coast Guard from March 1942 through December 1945. At that time he was twenty-one years old, and he was in the service until he was twenty-five years old. Early in 1943, Mr. Cassells passed through Ellis Island and spent two or three nights here, and I also want to say that Mr. Cassells is the son of a man who immigrated to this country from Northern Ireland, although it appears that he came, uh, through a few years before Ellis Island opened. But at the time that Mr. Cassells was here at Ellis Island in the Coast Guard, he thought his father had come through Ellis Island. Okay. Well, it's a pleasure. I'm so happy that you were able to come here today and that we're going to be able to have your story as part of our record of Ellis

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Island history. Um, let's start at the beginning. Would you say your birth date?

CASSELLS: My birthday is November 26, 1920.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

CASSELLS: I was born in North Grosvenordale, Connecticut.

LEVINE: Could you spell where?

CASSELLS: North Grosvenordale, G-R-O-S-V-E-N-O-R-D-A-L-E, Connecticut.

LEVINE: And did you live in Connecticut until you went into the Coast Guard?

CASSELLS: Yes. I enlisted from that town in the, in the, uh, district of Boston, from the District of Boston. The Coast Guard station that I am listed from or in is in Boston. So I had to go from Thompson, Connecticut, North Grosvenordale, to Boston, to enlist.

LEVINE: What made you, uh, enlist in the Coast Guard? Do you remember?

CASSELLS: Well, at nineteen years old you think perhaps you can go out and win the war all by yourself. And so I was anxious, after Pearl Harbor, to go, get into the service. I had a brother who was already in the Navy, and he advised that I should get into the Coast Guard.

LEVINE: Do you remember why he thought you should go in the Coast Guard?

CASSELLS: Well, I guess his own personal reasons. He had been shipped all over the world. He had been in China when we were involved with the Chinese debacle in 1934, 1936, and he thought, I guess, that the Coast Guard was a safer place for his brother to . . .

LEVINE: His baby brother. ( she laughs )

CASSELLS: His baby brother. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What was your brother's name? What is your brother's name?

CASSELLS: My brother's name was Edward Cassells, the same name as the immigrant Edward Cassells, my father, his father.

LEVINE: Now, did you have other brothers, too?

CASSELLS: I had other brothers too, yeah. I had an older brother, Robert, and then I had three sisters who lived in this little town of North Grosvenordale. North Grosvenordale was part of the town of Thompson, way up in the northeast corner of Connecticut.

LEVINE: I see. Well, now, um, do you remember anything about your feelings of going down to enlist at that time?

CASSELLS: Well, I mean, we knew we were really in trouble when Pearl Harbor was attacked. And then, you know, the flag was being waved by everyone.

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And young people were being drafted. And, uh, I did have to register for the draft but, uh, in order to beat that I joined the Coast Guard. I know there was a very patriotic feeling among all people that they had to get out and do something for the war. My older brother went into, uh, took a job with Pratt & Whitney Aircraft Engines in Hartford because of the war.

He worked day and night putting out aircraft engines. So everyone wanted to do their part and, you know, as a young kid, thinking that he could win the war all by yourself, uh, I went off and joined the Coast Guard.

LEVINE: And what was your experience, what do you remember about your early days in the Coast Guard? Do you remember like sort of going there and what happened, and . . .

CASSELLS: Well, when I got into the Coast Guard, they didn't have any room for us, so I was sent home to wait until housing facilities were ready. It turned out that when I went to the training station at Manhattan Beach in New York City, near Coney Island, the facilities there were a mass of summer cottages. And the summer cottages had to be torn down. So one of the first things that happened to me was that they gave you a hammer, a sledgehammer and a hammer, and we were knocking down buildings for a little bit before we actually got into the business of training to go to sea or become a full-fledged member of the Coast Guard. My early time I did, I did service at Jack Dempsey's door. Jack Dempsey was a physical

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training expert with the Coast Guard in the beginning of the war. And, uh, I was a . . .

LEVINE: That's a fighter, right?

CASSELLS: The fighter, the world famous Jack Dempsey. And I did duty outside of his front door keeping people away from Jack Dempsey. But he was there training Coast Guardsmen. Well, that amounted to a situation of where we were knocking down buildings, training with wooden guns. We didn't have any rifles. Equipment was very poor. And spent, uh, two months there before I was shipped out to do horse patrol duty down in North Carolina on the beach, on the outer banks of North Carolina. So when I got, my early training was, uh, with a hammer, wooden guns and horses. ( he laughs ) Before I finally got a ship, which was then a destroyer escort.

LEVINE: Well, what were you doing on the horse patrol?

CASSELLS: Well, horse patrol was part of the Coast Guard that patrolled the beaches of the United States. We were supposedly there to ward off German invaders, submarine landings. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: So what, what was the year, or, roughly, when was it when you got off the horse patrol and got onto an actual, uh, ship?

CASSELLS: It had to be, my service record doesn't say when that was and I, you

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know, getting to be an old man now, couldn't really pin it down. But it had to be somewhere near the end of 1943, and that's when they shipped me out of there, out of North Carolina, up to New York, and that's how come I came through Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So you were coming, say a little bit more about the ship, your first ship that you were on after the, after the horse patrol.

CASSELLS: Well, the first ship came after I'd been up here in New York at a steam engineering school on the ferryboat Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Wait, excuse me, I'm sorry, I may be confused here. When you, after the horse patrol, then where did you go from there?

CASSELLS: Up here to New York City.

LEVINE: Oh. Oh, okay. Okay. So, and that, when you came to New York City, was that when you went to Ellis Island at first?

CASSELLS: We were escorted here by a chief boatswain mate who took eighteen or twenty Coast Guardsmen up here to New York. He escorted us. We got off the subway, got on a ferryboat, and came over here to Ellis Island where we supposedly were going to be housed. And when we got here it was so crowded, uh, that there were no beds, evidently, and we had to find our own bedding. This was when I slept on the ferryboat benches because there were no bunks.

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LEVINE: Tell me anything you remember about those days here.

CASSELLS: It was, evidently it was so crowded, I remember a little bit about coming in and looking in the Great Hall, and it was just loaded with bunks. You know, as I remember it there were triple, double and triple-decker bunks.

LEVINE: And they were filling up the Great Hall.

CASSELLS: Yeah. They were filling up the great Hall, the downstairs part of the great Hall, as I remember. Uh, the chow lines were so long that we didn't get too much to eat while we were here. But we were just there for a just a little while, and then, uh, two or three nights, and then, uh, they shipped us out and up to the Hotel Sutton on 56th Street.

LEVINE: Do you know what you expected was supposed to happen when you got here?

CASSELLS: Well, I was a young kid and didn't really know what was going on. Actually thinking that I was being escorted up here by some admiral, because this chief boatswain mate had gold stripes all over his sleeves. And to a young kid I thought, "Gee, this guy was really something." He turned out to be just a regular enlisted man who had risen to the ranks of chief. But I expected, and when we left North Carolina we were going to steam school, as it was called by the service people. And I expected that we were going to go right on a boat. As it turned out, we were

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shipped through Ellis Island, stopped off here just for a brief bit, and then into a hotel. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: So you might have been staying here while you were in steam school rather than the hotel if it hadn't been so full.

CASSELLS: No. The hotel had been set up for, uh, Coast Guard educational purposes. There were sailors there that were going to steam school, others that were going to radar school, and others that were going over to the Brooklyn Navy Yard for other kinds of training. So the hotel actually had been taken by the government and converted it into a, uh, a dormitory for school purposes.

LEVINE: Now, what, say again the name of the hotel and its location.

CASSELLS: The Sutton Hotel on East 56th Street. It's where a very famous murder took place. I've forgotten now who it was. Some woman, some gal that was a movie star that was murdered in the hotel just before the government took it over. I can't remember her name either, which doesn't matter. But we stayed there, and every day we got on a subway and went downtown to the Manhattan Bridge where the ferryboat was, the steam ferryboat, the ferryboat Brooklyn. And we went to school there. We went at nighttime I remember. We went down at night. Got on the subway and went down there at night. School was at night.

LEVINE: And what'd you do during the day?

CASSELLS: We messed around in New York City, I guess you could say. I remember skating at RCA, at the ice rink, during the day, and meeting my sister and brother-in-law, who came to New York to visit during the day. So we were off during the day, but then we went to school at night until about ten or eleven o'clock.

LEVINE: And how long did that last?

CASSELLS: That lasted, uh, three months, I believe, I remember, traipsing onto the subway with the civilians all looking at us, you know, that kind of thing.

LEVINE: In uniform?

CASSELLS: In uniform, oh, yeah. In work uniform, which, plain blues and, uh, a white hat. ( they laugh )

LEVINE: And what did you learn, specifically?

CASSELLS: How to operate a steamboat, steam engines. Because the navy, at that time, still had a lot of steam, steam-powered engines, steam-powered boats, and, uh, we were instructed into operation of steam engines. The instructors were people, men from, uh, one of the technical schools in Brooklyn, Technical High School in Brooklyn. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: So you, you would be eventually running the . . .

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CASSELLS: We would be the engineers on a steamboat.

LEVINE: The navy was . . .

CASSELLS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Was . . .

CASSELLS: Which was a complete waste, because I never went on a steamboat. I went on a diesel engine boat. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

CASSELLS: That's the way the Navy did things.

LEVINE: So, um, so after your three months in steamship school, then what?

CASSELLS: Well, then we went back to the Fifth Naval District, because technically we were loaned from the, to the Second Naval District, which is New York, to go to this school, but then we were to be returned to the Fifth Naval District for duty.

LEVINE: What, where was the Fifth . . .

CASSELLS: The Fifth Naval was Norfolk, Virginia. Then we went back to Norfolk, Virginia, and then went back out onto the beach in North Carolina.

LEVINE: The horse patrol?

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CASSELLS: I'm out of the horse patrol, too, and beach patrol with jeeps. They had graduated ( he laughs ) graduated to jeeps by that time, 1944. No, it couldn't, the end of '43 they were more or less patrolling the beaches, all the beaches in North Carolina then with jeeps.

LEVINE: And did, were you spotting things when you were patrolling those beaches?

CASSELLS: Well, there were some instances. There had been nine Portuguese sailors that had been buried in the Kitty Lock Lifeboat Station, the Coast Guard station in Kitty Lock. A Portuguese ship had been sunk off the beach, and they were buried on, in the backyard of the Coast Guard station. Uh, but I guess you'd say, there were some people who said that they saw lights off shore and that submarines were off there. There had been, I guess, actually, but, you know, we didn't really run into them, but we were patrolling the beach, keeping an eye out for them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then, and then after, after you did that, you did that through the end of '43?

CASSELLS: '43.

LEVINE: And then, uh, what did you do after that?

CASSELLS: At the end of '40, at the end of '43, uh, I was assigned to a brand new destroyer escort in Orange, Texas, outside of Houston. A brand new

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ship had been made. They were building D.E.'s, you know, a lot of D.E.'s. And, uh, I was sent with a nucleus crew out of Norfolk, Virginia, to Texas to pick up this new destroyer escort, and the rest of my service time was, uh, on this D.E. We went thirteen trips to Europe escorting, and then back into the Pacific when the war in Europe was over. So the rest of my service time was on a Destroyer Escort.

LEVINE: And so did you see actual, uh, battle, I mean, were you in the thick of the war?

CASSELLS: The kind of duty that we did was chasing submarines that you never did see. They were beneath the surface. Uh, we did come out of Normandy with the first hospital ship. The George Washington came out of Normandy with the first load of wounded at Normandy, and we escorted them halfway across the ocean, halfway across the Atlantic, and then the George Washington, which was faster than we were, took off, headed for the states, by itself. But we dropped a number of depth charges, and there were supposedly hits on submarines, but we never did see any. We were on the surface, and they were below.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you couldn't tell they were under there.

CASSELLS: Well, we picked up soundings of them being there, and supposedly they were there. They were sinking ships like crazy. So . . .

LEVINE: So, um, let's see. So you were in the service when the war was over.

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CASSELLS: Yeah. When V-E Day came, I can't remember these dates now, but when V-E Day came we were headed for the Pacific, and we finished off the war until after V-J Day. I spent the last, after V-J day from September to December doing occupation duty of Japanese islands in the Carolines, the island of Kusaie, K-U-S-A-I-E, had been occupied by the Japanese, and they had enslaved the people there. And we went in and disarmed the island and, uh, set those people free, emaciated prisoners of war. And finished the war up, finished in December up there, and then the boat came, the boat had to come back into the yard for repairs, and we came back to California.

LEVINE: So that was really your, your major experience of, like, sort of one-on-one with other people, uh, enemy, enemies.

CASSELLS: Yeah. Well, even so, it wasn't one-on-one, because we were kind of a guard dog for what was going on on the island, and we actually didn't come in contact with Japanese prisoners.

LEVINE: I see.

CASSELLS: We did disarm them and took all the armaments and took them to sea and dumped them, destroyed them. But, uh, coming one-on-one with people when you're on a destroyer escort, you don't really.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So, uh, do you remember, uh, the, your feelings and

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the feelings of your, uh, other Coast Guards when the war was over?

CASSELLS: Oh, they went crazy. They turned on the firehoses and yelled and screamed, and banging pots and pans and shellcases and, uh, actually turn on the firehoses in the engine rooms and shortcircuited all the electrical equipment and that kind of thing. That was, uh, that was V-J Day more than V-E Day. V-E Day we were in the middle of the Atlantic coming home, so the ship was underway and, uh, I don't remember now whether we were escorting someone or not, but we were on our way home on V-E Day when that all happened. But V-J Day we were in, uh, Honolulu, tied to the dock, and everyone just went wild, you know, on all ships. Firehoses squirting in the air, and firing guns and shellcases and doing all kinds of crazy things.

LEVINE: And there must have been a lot of servicemen there.

CASSELLS: Oh, Hawaii's mobbed, you know. You know, Honolulu is like Norfolk, Virginia.

LEVINE: Well. How do you feel about, um, having your stint in the Coast Guard?

CASSELLS: Well, I guess now that that's over and you look back, it's kind of a, it was kind of a proud moment, one that you don't forget. And, uh, we came close a few times but, uh, fortunately we got out of it okay. Our ship was never hit and, uh, where other DE's had been hit and cut in half by shells or torpedoes or kamikaze airplanes, we were fortunate. We didn't come

up against any of that kind of thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But I guess you always knew that it could happen.

CASSELLS: Oh, it could happen.

LEVINE: I mean, you were aware that it was . . .

CASSELLS: Sure. You were on pins and needles all the time, when general quarters sounded you didn't know what was going to happen, whether it would be a torpedo, or whether it was a false alarm or what, you know.

LEVINE: How long would you be out, like, at a time, before you . . .

CASSELLS: It took thirteen days for us to cross the Atlantic with a convoy, so it was at least thirteen days one way, and then we would supply, supply the ship, so to speak, in Europe, Londonderry or Glasgow or Southampton, and that would take a week. And then we'd be back with another trip of thirteen days. So we were gone for a good month, month-and-a-half when we had a convoy to escort. We had thirteen. I was across twenty-six times. Round trip, thirteen times, twenty-six crossings of the Atlantic, with convoys.

LEVINE: And, um, do you remember anything else that pertains to the time when you were here at Ellis Island?

CASSELLS: No. That's very vague, and I don't know why it is vague. There is

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nothing on my service record as to even being here. They didn't record anything. I checked that last night and, uh, nothing on it mentioned that we came through Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you think that was a routine in those days?

CASSELLS: I think it must have been a routine. The Coast Guard was here in great numbers, and the boats in the slip were, a lot of cutters were in the slip here.

LEVINE: Just in rough terms, do you have any idea how many Coast Guards were here?

CASSELLS: People were here? No, I wouldn't even hazard a guess, I don't think.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CASSELLS: But the place was crowded, so there wasn't, there wasn't any room for us, really. I guess this was just a stopping-off place for sailors that were going somewhere else. The permanent crew, if you want to call them that, here, uh, were doing duty in the harbor, and a lot of them were running across to the Brooklyn Navy Yard doing duty over there, I guess. Maybe even some were doing duty in the city with a shore patrol, that kind of thing. But there was a permanent group here, quite a few men. A number of boats, a number of cutters that were tied up here. It was a crowded place. As I remember, we came in on the ferry. We didn't

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come in on a Coast Guard boat. We came in on the ferry, I believe.

LEVINE: From Battery Park?

CASSELLS: It had to be from Battery Park. We got off, I remember, as a, you know, subways were an impressive kind of thing for a kid in the sticks and, uh, we got off at, uh, we got off the subway coming downtown New York, and I don't think the boatswain mate knew where he was going either, but we were, we came downtown from, uh, I guess Penn Station. I don't think it would be Grand Central, but coming up from the south we came into Penn Station. Coming down from Penn Station we got off at Chambers Street and roamed around down there before we finally found where we were supposed to be going. And he found a ferry or something or other, and we ( he laughs ) so it had to be probably from, uh, from, uh . . .

LEVINE: Battery Park.

CASSELLS: Battery Park to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you remember the boatswain's name?

CASSELLS: No, I don't. I can see him, but I can't remember his name. You know, they didn't associate with ordinary sailors. They were above us. They just pushed us around and pulled us around until they got us where we were going.

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LEVINE: Do you remember anyone else who was here when you were here at Ellis Island?

CASSELLS: You mean actually by name? Not really, no. There were eighteen or twenty of us that went to steam school. I think there was a kid by the name of Lichner [ph] that was with me, and another kid by the name of, ah, there's one. Another kid by the name of Akstell [ph] who came from, uh, he was an Illinois kid. Illinois? Yeah. He became a pretty good friend of mine. Yeah, that's right. Wendell Akstell [ph] from some little town in Illinois, that came up here with me to, uh . . .

LEVINE: To steamship.

CASSELLS: To school, and then stayed with, we were together, and then went on to the Rickets to destroyer escort together.

LEVINE: Oh. So he would have been also at Ellis Island for those few days with you.

CASSELLS: Yeah, yeah, uh-huh, right.

LEVINE: And, uh, oh, so, okay, there's one. ( she laughs )

CASSELLS: There's one, yes.

LEVINE: Is there anybody else who came up with you that you . . .

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CASSELLS: The name Lichner [ph], I can't remember his first name or where he was really from. He was the comedian of the group. But Wendell Akstell was one for sure that was with me, who went to steam school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What did you do for those three days when you were here? Do you remember?

CASSELLS: We just hung around, I think. As I killed time till they got us out of here and to the Hotel Sutton. I don't remember what, doing anything. I remember kind of probably looking around and seeing the crowded situation and seeing the big hall, but, uh, it's pretty vague and pretty sketchy.

LEVINE: At that time you thought your father had come through there. Do you remember, uh, any way that that affected you, I mean, being in this place where your father had come to this country, did that have any impact on you at that point?

CASSELLS: Not really, I don't think. I was a little young and not knowing just exactly what the score was. My father didn't talk too much about his coming to America. He would say a few things to, uh, the family, perhaps, but, and then once in a while he would relieve some story or anecdote with a brother.

LEVINE: Can you remember any of, sort of the family stories?

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CASSELLS: Well, the family story I think that impressed me the most was the fact that he walked from New York City to Ware, Massachusetts. Uh . . .

LEVINE: Quite a distance.

CASSELLS: Well, over, you know, a period of a few days, I suppose. He didn't do it, you know, too fast, perhaps. But being a young kid of seventeen, eighteen or nineteen years old he walked from the city and, uh, went all the way to Ware, Massachusetts, where he had a friend that had previously come to the United States by the name of Tom Burrough, who was already here, who got him a job as a pipefitter, ditch digger, pipefitter, uh, and they laid the, laid out the water system for the town city of Ware Massachusetts. He went, winded up being a pipefitter there, and then he eventually moved down into Northeastern Connecticut to this little town of North Grosvenordale, where he met my mother, and, uh, the six children that resulted thereafter, you know.

LEVINE: So, uh, what was your father's name?

CASSELLS: Edward, Edward, without a middle name.

LEVINE: And your mother's name and maiden name?

CASSELLS: Was Lois Edna Child, C-H-I-L-D, from an old, old New England family. Uh, she was the local girl in the town that he moved to. Her father was a, uh, stonecutter, a piano tuner and a piano salesman, and a

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Connecticut legislator. ( they laugh ) He was a Jack-of-all-trades. And a chicken farmer, I guess, too. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Wow. Well, is there anything else? What did you do after you got out of the service?

CASSELLS: I went home for a while to where I had been an optical instrument maker with the American Optical Company in South Ridge, Massachusetts. And I stayed at home. I was there at home for a little while. Uh, while I was in the service I met my wife, my wife-to-be, who was a U.S. Navy Wave, Alberta, that you met.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was her maiden name?

CASSELLS: Trotter. T-R-O-T-T-E-R.

LEVINE: And do you have children?

CASSELLS: Yes. We have, uh, four daughters, and eight grandchildren.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CASSELLS: All living and happy, and one in Texas and one in New Hampshire and two in New Jersey, so they're scattered all over.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, uh, is there anything else that you would like to say? I mean, is there, perhaps what you're proudest of, um, that you would

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mention, uh, before we close?

CASSELLS: Well, I think I was proud of the service time that I put in, the kinds of things that we did do. I think it was actually a real contribution. I still (?), I'm a member of DESA, which is Destroyer Escort Association, and kind of keep an interest in what's going on with the naval services, Navy and the Coast Guard. And I think we did something for, uh, the country that, uh, was important. Escorting equipment to, uh, Europe, and helping to win the war in Europe.

LEVINE: Well, great. Well, i want to thank you very much.

CASSELLS: You're welcome.

LEVINE: I've been talking with David Cassells, and it's November 8, 1993. We're here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio, and this is Janet Levine, and I'm signing off. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW