EI-422
CHARLES PELASKE
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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MILITARY POLICE STATIONED AT THE STATUE OF LIBERTY
1937-1938

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, December 29, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Charles Pelaske. Mr. Pelaske was stationed in the army on Bedloe's Island from February of 1937 to June or July of 1938. Anyway, welcome. And I want to begin, Mr. Pelaske, by you giving me your birth date.

PELASKE: I was born in Chicago, Illinois in 19, August 25, 1912.

SIGRIST: Can you give me just a very quick rundown of your family background?

PELASKE: I'm eighty-one now. And my family background is that

we had two generations born in Chicago, and prior to that they came from Stuyvesant, Germany. And our name was spelled the same way the Pulaski Skyway is named. And somewhere's about eighty or ninety years ago the change was made, and it was put in the family bible, so that our family tree has just grown as Pelaske.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the old spelling and then the new spelling?

PELASKE: The old spelling was P-U-L-A-S-K-I, and the present spelling now is P-E-L-A-S-K-E.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

PELASKE: And I have, uh, oh, what is it? I have fourteen grandchildren and two great-grand.

SIGRIST: Well, let's begin our conversation with you telling me how you got involved in the army in the first place.

PELASKE: Well, I came back from, I come back from a cruise on the Grace Line working as a fireman, and got off the ship, and was wandering up and down downtown New York. And all of a sudden I said, "Well, I've got to get somewhere's to stay for the night." So I went over to the Sloan [ph] House and I went in there and I got me

a room for the night, and I got it half price, which was very nice, because I used my soldier's ID from Chicago, when I was at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and I mustered out over there, well, I got to, I got my, uh, little card, you know, to go. And, uh, so, uh, at six o'clock in the morning there was a knock on the door. I opened the door up, and here's a guy, a sergeant, an army sergeant, and he's six-foot-four. He says, "Mr. Pelaske?" "Yes?" He says, "I'd like to talk to you." I said, "Well, come on in." You know, I'm standing there, and I wasn't even dressed, you know. He says, "Don't worry about it." He says, "I'm used to being amongst men." You know, in the army, you're around them. So then he says, "Can you tell me a little bit about how come you got half rate for your room?" I says, "Well, I soldiered in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and I used my, my, uh, you know, I was discharged from there with a good discharge, and, so I used that for the half rate." He says, "Well, you got a little bit of a problem, Mr. Pelaske. That is very deceitful, you know." He says, "You can't do it that way. Now," he says, "I got to take you downtown and find out if you're a deserter." So he says, "I'll take you down. Everything will be free. You go

downtown, we'll go and we'll have breakfast, and we'll go over and we'll see Captain Fisher [ph] who's over there in Whitehall Street, and we'll have a little talk with him." So, okay. Finally I wound up in front of the captain, and he says, "Well, can you explain this here little deal down there at Sloan [ph] House?" And I said, "Well, I just figured it was a good chance to get half fare, and that's what I did." He says, "Well, you understand," he says, "you sort of misused that there card." So he said, "We want to find out if you're a deserter." So he says, "I hereby direct that you be taken to, to the Statue of Liberty where we have Fort Wood, and we will keep you there until we find out that you're okay. And, uh, don't forget, there's two soldiers down in the pier with guns, so you can't escape." And, of course, this is wintertime, and there's nobody going to swim to the Jersey shore from the statue. So I went over there and, uh, after, uh, five days I said, "Well, you know, I like it here. This is nice out here on this island, around the statue, and they got a boiler house, and they got a little of everything going on here, you know. A little city all by itself." And, uh, so I asked permission to go back over to Whitehall Street

and see the captain, and I went in, I said, "Captain, I'd like to re-enlist." He says, "Those are magic words." He says, "I love the sound of them." He says, "Yes." He says, "You're eligible." He says, "And we'll accept you." He says, "And you're going to be in the First Division MP Company, Fort Wood, uh, Statue of Liberty Island." I forgot now how he phrased it, but that suffices anyhow.

SIGRIST: Before we get too far along, you know, we deal with oceanliners all the time, with our immigrant interviews. And I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about your work with the Grace Line oceanliners, before we get too far into the Statue of Liberty stuff.

PELASKE: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Because I think that would be of some interest.

PELASKE: Okay. Well, I made two trips on the Grace Line. We went to the West Coast, to South America, and the trip took fifty-nine days round trip.

SIGRIST: Were these luxury liners, or were they . . .

PELASKE: It was a luxury liner, yes. Well, no. We took an

awful lot of freight on, too. It was fifty-fifty. And, um, we go from here to Jamaica, from Jamaica we go to the Panama Canal, through the Panama Canal, and then go on down the West Coast of South America, hitting twenty-six ports of call, till we got down to Valparaiso, Chile. In other words, we'd go, um, oh, golly, if I remember all of it, but anyhow, Peru and Chile were the biggest ones for ports. And at the end of the run down in Valparaiso, we would take in, take all the passengers off, and all the freight, and then we'd go up another three hundred miles farther south, and then in three days the whole complete ship would get painted. They'd have about thirty-five guys, and none of them wore shoes. Most unbelievable thing! Nobody with any foot trouble. No smashed nails or nothing. And there they are climbing all over and going like crazy painting that ship. So then we got back, and, I'm sorry, but I should back up a little tiny bit. When we were coming south, uh, through Peru, we crossed the equator. And then once we passed the equator, then up above us was a Southern Cross. And I had read in books, like Horatio Alger and so on, where they said, uh, "Well, you know, the Southern Cross is up there, and it watches over you while

you're sailing in that area." And when I finally realized about this Southern Cross business, all of a sudden I'm looking off the, instead of looking up from the bowel of the ship at the Southern Cross, I'm looking at it from the, uh, from the back of the ship. We had passed under the Southern Cross, and it was like way far in, when we got down to the other end of Valparaiso, the Southern Cross was way back in the horizon, from the back of the ship. I says, "That's the way it was in the book. I can't, I don't understand what's going on, you know." It's just one of those things that your childhood imagination says it was, it was, that's the way it was in the book. And it was just absolutely wonderful, you know.

SIGRIST: What was your job with the Grace Line?

PELASKE: I was a fireman, and auxiliary oiler. And in port, well, I had to run auxiliary engines, the generators, refrigeration. You had to be, the firemen, uh, he just lit the boiler and just let it set the flame so the steam gauge would be just so, and you'd go out and do other jobs, changing water filters, changing oil filters. Oh, what messes they got us into. And if you made a mistake on the valves, you got an oil bath

or a water bath. And, of course, you shut the valve off real quick when you discovered your mistake, you know. That was one of the things, the basic fireman. (they laugh) And, of course, the crew, they'd roast you about it, you know. "Well, we thought we had professional people on board here, you know." And they'd rub it in a little bit. It was all right, though. It was nice.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the ships that sailed under the Grace Line, some of the names of the ship?

PELASKE: Uh, well, they were more or less like, uh, the names of Columbus ships, and I was on the Santa Maria. And, of course, when we came back through the canal and we get a day on each port, on each end of the Panama Canal, and I rode on the smokestack, and I took pictures. Oh, it was absolutely fabulous up there. And watch these here little donkeys pulling the ship along, you know. And then when we got going between locks, well, there'd be like eighteen and twenty-foot alligators on the bank sunning themselves. Oh, it was absolutely beautiful.

SIGRIST: Pretty exotic for a kid from Chicago.

PELASKE: Yeah, right, you know. And they'd say, "Oh, I wish I had my mother and dad here, you know, and I could show them, you know." So I took all the pictures that, well, I didn't have very much money with me, so I was limited on picture-taking. Probably I took five or six pictures in the Panama Canal alone. And then, uh, in Panama, oh, we come into Panama, and we were only about a block from the pier. I said, "What in the world is . . ." "Oh, we hit a garbage dump." And here it was, they had a big ship there, and it was loading onions, and the whole port was nothing but onions. But you get used to it after a while, and you don't notice it. When you're first coming in out of the fresh water, oh, my goodness, it was absolutely superb.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, thanks for giving me a little information about the Grace Line. Let me ask you, when you were taken to Bedloe's Island, to the Statue of Liberty, and you said that you were kept five days before they asked you if you would like to re-enlist.

PELASKE: Well, I volunteered to re-enlist. They didn't ask me.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what transpired during those five

days, where you were kept, what they did with you?

PELASKE: Well, I was, I was up in the general barracks, and they had a hundred and twenty-five men altogether, of which actually I only seen a hundred. I don't know where the other twenty-five were. Maybe they were over at Fort Hamilton, uh, on duty over there, I don't know. But, uh, while I was there I got a chance to wander around on the island and wander in the statue. And, of course, I had to have my uniform on. When I went past a certain point from the backyard, the backyard of the statue, we had to have our uniforms on. And if we went down to the pier, we go down to the pier in fatigues if we were doing baggage handling or freight handling. And that was the extent of it. But, uh, I got a chance to roam around there, and then I went and I seen this here boiler room. Here they got two boilers, and then they got another place where they got a station for, uh, taking and chlorinating the water, and there's a few other jobs around there that, uh, I heard, you know, that, uh, from time to time they needed people for them. So I says, "Hey, you know, gee, maybe I can re-enlist, and I could get a job doing some of these things, you know." So when

I explained to the captain that I was familiar with boilers, and I was familiar with pumps, I was familiar with electric work to a certain extent, and he said, "Well, that's just wonderful." He said, "I imagine that we get to know you, we can start using some of these services. In the meantime, you're gonna shine up, you're gonna go on Times Square three nights a week, and when you're on in Times Square you're gonna be pushing the grass cutter, or pushing the snow shovel." He says, "That's the prerequisites." "Oh, yeah," he says, "I forgot. We have a little bit of a pile of coal down on the pier. It's around about seventy-five, eighty tons, and we've got to move that a little bit at a time up to the, uh, barrack, up to the officers." They had a place there where they had boilers in the basement just for the officers only, and, uh, he says, "And that means about four or five tons of coal to shovel. And then the ashes, you got to take them down in back of the statue and dump them in the bay, and we've got a half a ton truck that you can put a big load on it." (he laughs) A big load. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Now, how did you feel about this? I mean, did you not

have anything important going on in your life? You were ready to devote yourself to this work?

PELASKE: Absolutely. You see, I had always been a loner up to that point. And, uh, I didn't have anything in particular in my mind. It was really, uh, unbelievable that a person could be so distant and so alone. And yet I was, I was happy because I was in a new environment around new people, around new buildings, and I could see New York, and here I am on the statue, look right up and see the statue, and say, "Hey, Ma, you should see this." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the layout of the island, and, because obviously it looked very different than it does now.

PELASKE: Well, yeah. In those days we had two barracks, uh, on the island.

SIGRIST: And you lived in one of those barracks?

PELASKE: In one of the barracks we had. It had the steam heat in it, and had the facilities. It had a mess hall. And in the basement we had a tailor shop, a shoemaker, a barber shop and, uh, our general bathroom was down

there also. Everybody had to go down to the basement to shave, take a shower, whatever. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the room where you slept looked like?

PELASKE: We had a room that was around about sixty feet long and about forty feet wide, and we had bunks on both sides of an aisle, double row of bunks on each side of an aisle. When you came up the stairs, the bunks were to the left or to the right of the stairway in double rows so that you'd have all these here men in there. And, uh, you know, for the life of me I can't remember where my bunk was, even, any more. I remember we had our locker on the walls and, you know, when you got up in the morning, some mornings you could, if clothing was hung out, you could take it and ring water out of it, that's how damp it was out there sometimes. Extremely damp. But we only had a couple of guys that would get colds or get sick or coughing out of that whole outfit. It was unbelievable. But we were kept in such good shape that our metabolism was really superb, you know.

SIGRIST: Was there an infirmary on this island, on Bedloe's

Island?

PELASKE: No, we didn't have an infirmary.

SIGRIST: IF someone got sick, where would they go?

PELASKE: Well, then you had to go to governor's island. Uh, take, uh, the, take the boat, the Statue of Liberty boat over to the ferry, and then go over and jump on the ferry going over to Governor's Island. And then, well, they'd usually send, um, somebody that was a little higher ranked than you with you, so you didn't go any detour while you was going out, going over there and back, you know.

SIGRIST: So now you said there were two of these barracks on the island.

PELASKE: That's two of the barracks. The one barracks, I never, all I seen was I looked in the windows, they had it locked up. I looked in the windows and I, uh, it was vacant. There was nothing in it. And, uh, I asked people about that, and they really, they couldn't hardly tell me anything about it. They said, "They had no recollection of anybody ever being in that building." Because they had, all they needed was

in the one building. And then we had a powerhouse, which was adjacent to the, uh, to the two, uh, barracks, and that powerhouse had two, uh, hard horsepower boilers, which they maintained sixty pound steam pressure, um, for the heat in the general area, the buildings in the general area. There was the barracks, and then a couple of buildings right nearby, got steam from there. And then we had a radio station in the back corner, that all the communications from Governor's Island and Whitehall Street came over to that building and went out on that radio tower. And, uh, as far as I know, it, that radio station had quite a bit of, quite a bit of power, but just how much I never could find out, you know. They didn't want us to know too much about what was going on around there.

SIGRIST: And that was a separate building unto itself?

PELASKE: That was a separate building on the back corner of the Statue.

SIGRIST: I see. And it was not connected to the powerhouse in any way.

PELASKE: No, no. It was a separate building, all by itself. And, uh, they had a switchboard in there that, uh,

they, uh, anybody who wanted to communicate with the officers and their families that lived on the island, they had about, uh, twenty-five families of officers, and they had their own separate quarters. Real, very nice quarters.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what they looked like?

PELASKE: Those buildings, those buildings were, uh, I would say they were at least about a hundred years old, but in very good condition. And,uh, and, of course, anybody that got extra duty had to go over and paint in these buildings, so the officers always had, every room was fresh and meticulous, you know.

SIGRIST: Was there, was there a civilian maintenance staff on the island, or . . .

PELASKE: No.

SIGRIST: All the men were, did all of that work.

PELASKE: All the men, yeah. The only thing was that, uh, Mr. Pierce [ph] was the, uh, was the superintendent of the statue and the property, and, uh, if he got into too big a bind, well, they had a couple of men come over. Where they come from or what the circumstances

were, I never found out. We had, uh, very high voltage electricity coming into the base of the statue, and the switchboard there, and then you had remote control to turn on the statue lights. And about maybe once a week I'd go over there and turn on the statue lights when the timer didn't work. So I had that job (?), "Hey, honey, now you're all lit up." (they laugh) Yeah. You know, to press a button and turn all those lights on, that really is, it just makes your heart jump. You can't help it. I mean, it's something that, uh, the nostalgia, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what time the lights were to go on, and what time they were to go off?

PELASKE: Mostly at dusk, and then, um, some of the lights went off, like eleven o'clock at night. And on holidays, well, they'd stay on till twelve, and then the torches stay on all night. That torch had to burn. That's all there is to it. You have to show ships coming in with people on them that the torch is lit, and here I am, here's the liberty. Here's the liberty that we're offering anybody that comes here, and the people that live here, you know. And that, that was, uh, that was something that was unwritten, an unwritten law to

respect this thing about, uh, the liberty that we enjoy, and that we want to impart to people coming in and seeing it for the first time that, uh, course. At that time, uh, I don't know what they were doing with the people coming in from, uh, from Ellis. They weren't going into Ellis Island. It was already closed. I haven't the faintest idea what they were doing with them, so I can't tell you anything about that.

SIGRIST: Well, this brings me to a question about, the Statue of Liberty has two separate lives, doesn't it? It has the military life.

PELASKE: Right.

SIGRIST: But it also has the tourist life.

PELASKE: That's right.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about tourism on the island, and what the army's interaction, if any, with the tourist was, that whole aspect of the Statue of Liberty at that time?

PELASKE: Well, uh, the, uh, Parks Department had some people there to, uh, in the lobby of the statue and the

elevator, and that was the extent of any employees outside of, Mr. Hill and his wife, and family, they took care of the, um, what you call it, the memorabilia, the statue, and all kinds of things that they offered for, like a gift shop.

SIGRIST: Mr. Hill was the concessionaire for the Statue of Liberty.

PELASKE: He was the concessionaire, yeah. (he coughs) Excuse me.

SIGRIST: Maybe you could talk about Mr. Hill a little bit, and what his personality was like, and the sort of business that her ran there.

PELASKE: Mr. Hill, Mr. Hill, I have to call him senior now, because his son is at the statue now, but Mr. Hill was, he was sort of like a quiet gentleman, you know, but he was most gracious and talked to everybody. He liked to talk to people. He had people from all over the world come in there and say hello to him as he was pretty well, a pretty well-known gentleman. And, uh, he lived over in, he lived over in Hoboken the same as, uh, Mr. Peterson, the photographer, that was on the front of the statue. He'd take your picture, and

he'd superimpose the statue alongside you. And, um, in them days we had around about, uh, on weekends we'd have around about a thousand people come over, and during the week we'd have about three or four hundred every day. And, of course, we had two MP's down on the pier greeting the people, and keeping them in line when they were going back on the boat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any kind of a disruption when visitors were there, visitors getting out of hand or trying to get into areas where they weren't allowed to get into?

PELASKE: No, we didn't have any trouble that way. Unbelievable. We had some people wander, but we would tell them that this is an off limits area. And there was enough of us wandering around all the time doing work that, uh, I had, I can't remember that we had one time where we had to have people armed with sidearms to get on the job. But they told me that, uh, they had a couple of anxious times down on the pier, and, uh, you know, in a military investigation they don't tell you very much. And the guys are told not to tell the other fellows about what happened. But we knew that, uh, they had people come on the island and, uh, they had ulterior motives, because when they come off

of the boat, right away they started talking. And their talking was like, that they come there for a purpose, in other words, they were advertising why they were there. And then the guards would pull their gun on them and make them get on the boat, make them get back on the boat, and wouldn't even let them come on the island. I know there was two times like that. But, uh, just how the thing started or anything, but they got them, they nipped them while they were on the pier yet. They didn't get a chance to get up by the statue.

SIGRIST: The boats that brought the tourists out to Ellis Island, was that a private concession also?

PELASKE: That was a private concern, yeah. That was a private concern, it was very coveted. As a contractor, uh, they, they maintained what service they felt like, and they'd load the boats up terrible heavy, terrible. We'd have to get after them once in a while and ask them what the head count was, you know, because we didn't want the boat to have trouble and sink in the harbor. We'd say, well, the people won't want to go to the Statue of Liberty if they got that to contend with. And I have already at one time, uh, my visiting

here in recent years, I have contacted the Coast Guard and alerted them that I felt that they were putting too many people on the boats, and that I was wondering if it was at all possible they could sort of take a look at the situation. And from the Coast Guard commandant for New York sent me a very beautiful letter. He says, "How rare for somebody from California to worry about how many people's on the boat going across to the statue." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a second.

PELASKE: Okay.

SIGRIST: And Kevin's going to flip the tapes over, and then we'll keep talking.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. We're continuing with Charles Pelaske. Mr. Pelaske, can you give me a rundown of what an average day was for you on the island from the time you got up to your duties during the day to whatever

you did at night, and then the time you went to bed.

PELASKE: Well, starting the day off, providing you didn't miss the last boat and you come over on the first boat. If you come over on the first boat, you didn't get no breakfast. Sergeant Cleavenger was a three hundred and fifty pound mess sergeant, and he didn't believe in saving food for other people. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What was his name?

PELASKE: Cleavenger. Sergeant Cleavenger.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

PELASKE: C-L-E-A-V-E-N-G-E-R.

SIGRIST: Now, you were stationed on the island, right?

PELASKE: Yes, that's right.

SIGRIST: You slept here on the island.

PELASKE: Yeah. We slept, we slept on the Statue of Liberty Island.

SIGRIST: What time did you have to get up?

PELASKE: Well, we had to get up at seven o'clock.

SIGRIST: And then was there some kind of a routine?

PELASKE: We, uh, what we do is, uh, we'd go down and, uh, shave, shave and get dressed, and then we had to take, and we took turns. We had to take and swing the mop through the barracks, dry-mop the floor. And, uh, and then we'd have breakfast eight o'clock and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Was there a cafeteria on the island, or in the barracks?

PELASKE: No. We had our own, we had our cafeteria line just only for our mess. That's all. Nobody else. Just for the soldiers that, uh, you know, were in the military police contingent. And, uh, we just go up in a line and they, all the cooking was done on coal stoves, and, uh, the pans were like, uh, twenty-four by thirty-two and, uh, this and that and everything else was all in the different pans, and you just walk along and took a shovel full of this and a shovel full of that, whatever you wanted. And then plenty of coffee, and then, um, on Christmas and special holidays, they would take and they'd put, uh, two packs of cigarettes for every man, and then, uh, three packs of Bull Durham for every man. So the guys were

swapping, he says, "I like Bull Durham." So then the other guy would swap the cigarettes, you know. And they're swapping back and forth. So by the time we walked out of that meal, everybody was happy. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: And Bull Durham being chewing tobacco, yes?

PELASKE: No, Bull Durham was smoking tobacco.

SIGRIST: Smoking tobacco.

PELASKE: Roll your own.

SIGRIST: I see.

PELASKE: Yeah. We had a couple of guys that were really good at it. They could do it one-handed, one-handed roll. Well, the reason why they did that was because, see, they were former cowboys, and, uh, when they were riding on a horse, then they had to do, hold the stirrup and roll a cigarette with one hand. And the Bull Durham hangs in their, hangs in their, they keep it in their mouth, the tag in their mouth, and they just dip it real fast and get enough tobacco on the paper. And then he rolls it and, uh, seals the ends, and then lights up. This is all one-handed operation.

Absolutely. I wish we had video cameras at that time, that I could take a picture of that. Because that was really an elegant piece of work.

SIGRIST: And a lost art at this point.

PELASKE: To make a cigarette, yeah. Make a cigarette while you're riding horseback one-handed. And, um . . .

SIGRIST: So after you ate breakfast, what would be some of the typical duties?

PELASKE: Well, after we ate breakfast then, uh, they'd, uh, have the fatigue line up, and then the sergeant would come out and, uh, Sergeant Shaw was the first sergeant and Sergeant Rohn, R-O-H-N, was more or less our guiding light for the day. He'd say, uh, "All right, you guys, Pelaske, Mikaloupi [ph], Ryan, Smith, you guys, coal detail." (he laughs) And, so that meant go down, get the truck, load it up with coal, take it down, empty it out, pick up the ashes, take them down to the back of the statue. And then, uh, we'd be through by ten, ten fifteen. And we'd go back to the barracks, clean up, and we could kick back until noontime mess. And, uh, everybody made noontime mess, guaranteed, because they always had a good meal.

Noontime was our heavy meal, and then the evening meal was a lighter meal. But it was always good and, uh, very popular. And we had some very good cooks, very good. The cooks were on a day on and a day off. Noontime, they cooked a noontime meal, and they were off until noontime the next day, you know.

SIGRIST: So what would you do after you had your noontime meal?

PELASKE: Well, after we did our noontime meal, well, then maybe we'd have a little, uh, they would come along, like, uh, about one o'clock or one fifteen, come along and say, "Well, we've got a little job here, and a little job there, and the guys would have to turn to and go down and do it." It would take us an hour, and hour-and-a-half, you know. But it was getting us busy doing something.

SIGRIST: Did you do any kind of drills or anything on the island?

PELASKE: No. We did very little drilling, very little drilling. We did more drilling in pistol shooting.

SIGRIST: Oh, tell me a little bit about that.

PELASKE: And, um, well, in the pistol shooting we all shot a

.45 automatic pistol, which was army issue. And Captain Fisher [ph], he was a coach for the, one of the top New York police department pistol teams. And, uh, so you know that we got excellent coaching from him. I came up about number ten or eleven out of all the guys in the barracks for pistol shot.

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of a shooting gallery on the island?

PELASKE: We had the shooting gallery in the back of the statue, and we had like a great big sand hill. It went up around about seven feet in the air and, uh, we had our targets back there on that wall. And we just taking, "Bing, bing, bing, bing, bing," and then go down and get it.

SIGRIST: Was this something you might be doing while visitors were at the Statue of Liberty?

PELASKE: Uh, the visitors weren't allowed around the back half of the statue. We were, they were kept all the way up in front. So we never had any complications of people getting involved with us. That was, that was absolutely unbelievable, with a little bit of, um, I would say, uh, where they were keeping an eye on

things, that we didn't experience any problems with people coming back there. It was unbelievable. There was just signs, "This way is to the statue, this way is to the boat." And that was it. And the railings were up, and they were ordinary railings. There wasn't any high six-foot or eight-foot fences. There was just an ordinary, neat railing going along the sidewalk, guiding the people where to go. And it seemed like it contained it, you know.

SIGRIST: Now, you must need an enormous amount of food and provisions to keep this island going. Where did all that come from, and how did it get onto the island?

PELASKE: Oh, oh, boy. That was a, that was a detail that, we didn't relish that. About three days a week the officers, see, we had all these officers over there and their families, and they'd buy all our groceries at the PX over in Governor's Island. Then it was taken and put in boxes. The boxes were put on a truck. The truck was brought over to the ferry, and it rode the ferry over, then the trucks would come over to the Statue of Liberty boat and unload them onto the boat. And then once they got over to the island, well, then we had the job of getting them off

the boat, getting them on the pier, getting them in the truck, taking them up the hill to the officer's quarters, and don't get one colonel's groceries mixed up with the other colonel, otherwise you had a fight on your hands. You were in deep trouble. So we handled everything with kid gloves.

SIGRIST: Now, did the provisions for the regular men, did they come onto the island the same way?

PELASKE: The same way. The same way, yeah. Everything was the same. We got our sides of beef, and our groceries was like a case of corn, a case of stringbeans, a case of peas. A little bit of everything, you know. And then quite a bit of fresh vegetables, like lettuce, celery. We had, really we had unbelievable food. You'd think, you know, that, uh, when you're in the army that, uh, you're not going to have anything like you'd have at your dinner table at home, but, uh, you could live there the year 'round and you wouldn't miss anything.

SIGRIST: Now, were vehicles allowed on the island, on Bedloe's Island?

PELASKE: Oh, no.

SIGRIST: There were no cars or jeeps or . . .

PELASKE: We only had just that one truck, that half-ton Ford truck. That poor truck. It took a beating, I'm telling you. And once in a while they'd have to have the motorpool people come over from Governor's Island and they'd have to new spark plugs and wires and a distributor and they, you know, they'd do a PM on it.

SIGRIST: Were there any real roads on the island, or were there just . . .

PELASKE: No, no. It was just one road, just one road was all it was. And, uh, that was it. From the pier up, follow around over to the barracks, and that was the only road there was. And you couldn't even hardly see tire marks once you got past the officer's quarters, because the truck only went over there like once or twice a week, or going over to getting coal or dumping the ashes. Otherwise it was very little tiremarks there. It was . . .

SIGRIST: So everything was carried manually, then, around.

PELASKE: There was a lot of handwork. It kept us in good shape.

SIGRIST: Tha'ts why you were fed so well.

PELASKE: Well, I'll tell you another thing, you know, when we went up on Times Square, uh, there would be, like, three to five men, depending on what day it was. Friday and Saturday night we'd go down there about seven o'clock, and we'd stay till eleven. And, uh, then, uh, we'd have sidearms and a nightstick. That was our standard uniform. And you had to polish, and they inspected you before you left the island, so there was no ifs, ands or buts. You looked elegant when you went on to Times Square. So we'd go over and get on the subway free and ride up to, ride up to Times Square and walk around and, uh, see that everybody's, all these sailors and marines, and the army personnel, were all behaving, and nobody drunk, and then, uh . . .

SIGRIST: This was duty you had three times a week, you said.

PELASKE: Three times a week. Then we had the option to go over on Seventh Avenue and 42nd Street to Longchamps Restaurant and get a free meal. We'd go over there about nine-thirty, nine or nine-thirty. Half the time we didn't go over there, because, I mean, we were so

well-fed on the island, how much food can a person eat? So I'd go over there like on Saturday night, just, you know, to, uh, for the novelty of it, and say, "Well, I ate in Longchamps," you know. And the, uh . . .

SIGRIST: But your whole, the whole purpose for being there was to just sort of be a presence.

PELASKE: Yeah, a presence. A presence . . .

SIGRIST: So that people didn't do anything.

PELASKE: For military personnel, yeah. And once in a while we'd have some, uh, some soldiers that'd get obnoxious, you know. And we'd get a hold of them and say, "Look, you're going to straighten up and fly right, otherwise you're going to have to go back, you know, go back to Governor's Island."

SIGRIST: You say "we." How many people were sent on this detail?

PELASKE: Oh, well, three to five, depending on, like, Friday and Saturday night we had five people including the sergeant. There was always a sergeant. And, uh, we had a 42nd, 42nd and Broadway was our normal station

to meet, and we'd branch out from there. Guys would go this direction, that, he'd tell him which way he'd seen the soldiers all moving, you know. So then they'd keep track of them. So once in a while I'd get a hold of a couple of guys and say, "Look," you know, we'd just get a hold of them and say, "Look, you've, this is the second time now, so you're under arrest, come on with me." And take them down in the subway, get on the train. And just as the train was going to take off, I'd get off the car. (he laughs) Leave him on the train. Say, "Don't you come back," you know. Point to 'em. "Don't you come back," you know.

SIGRIST: Now, when you had this detail, did you stay overnight in New York, or did you go back out to Bedloe's Island at the end of the . . .

PELASKE: We went back out to Bedloe's Island. We always left Times Square so that we'd get the last boat. And it varied. During the week, I think, the last boat was ten-thirty, and eleven-thirty or twelve o'clock was the last boat on Friday and Saturday night.

SIGRIST: And this is a boat that's run by the army.

PELASKE: No, this is a boat that's run by the, uh, well, I

can't think of the name of the people that had the, uh, had a concession. They had a concession to operate the boat.

SIGRIST: Just for the army people, or is this the boat that's for the visitors?

PELASKE: No, that was for civilians and army. It was, of course, the army rode free, but the civilians had to pay three or four dollars to ride over.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting. Because I just naturally assumed that . . .

PELASKE: At that particular time they could only go to the statue. There was nobody coming on Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Did you have any interaction with Ellis Island at all? In that time, in the late 1930's, did you ever come over here?

PELASKE: Not while I was in the army, no. We'd just look over there and see there was maintenance people over there, you know, something going on. But nothing, uh, amounted to anything.

SIGRIST: You know, you mentioned earlier that you dumped the

ashes in the harbor.

PELASKE: Right.

SIGRIST: I have to ask you, what did you do with your garbage?

PELASKE: Uh, we burnt the garbage in the boiler, in the boiler room.

SIGRIST: And then the ashes would be dumped . . .

PELASKE: Yeah, the ashes would, in turn, be dumped. But, uh, there was no garbage being dumped in the water. It was just, uh, put the ashes on the hill, and some of them would go down to the water's edge, and, you know how it wall develops. So that, uh, the ashes from a hundred tons of coal probably moved the island out five feet. (they laugh) Made the island five feet bigger on that end.

SIGRIST: Was there a building on the island that was devoted to recreation for the army? Was there some building where you would go and . . .

PELASKE: We had a building where there was something like a gymnasium, and downstairs was a bowling alley. We had the bowling alley. So we could play basketball

upstairs, and bowl downstairs. And the bowling, you paid for that. You didn't get that free. Although it was operated by a sergeant, a great big guy. Oh, I can't remember his name. A great big guy. And, uh, there was no freebies. (he laughs) And then you could, uh, you could walk out in front and go up the stairs, and you could get snacks. Uh, beer, beer or, uh, soda, potato chips, whatever, you know. It was nice.

SIGRIST: What else did you do for recreation? Did they, did they have dances or parties or something?

PELASKE: Well, the only dances we had that amounted to anything actually you had to go over to Governor's Island on Thursday night. And you could dance, and they had all kinds of girls from all over New York and Hoboken, they came over, and, uh, we would dance with them, you know, and coffee and donuts, and then we'd see the girls to their ferry to go home, you know. And then, uh, on, uh, on our island, though, we had, uh, during the summertime, a couple of times during the summer, we would have the New York Police Department boat would come over to the island, tie up to the pier in the back, and roll a barrel of beer out on the dock.

And then we'd muster the, a gang, and get that, that beer was down there and in the cooler in a hurry, you know. And we'd have a lawn party, and it would be officers and all of us, uh, that weren't on duty would all be there for that party. And, uh, they, uh, Lieutenant Van Bibber [ph], he was like on the arrangement committee, and he'd get two or three girls over there, and they'd do bubble dances.

SIGRIST: Can you describe a bubble dance for us?

PELASKE: Well, something like Sally Rand used to do, you know. They had the bubbles front and back, you know, like three bubbles in front and three bubbles in back, and she'd dance around, and as she danced around, she'd go past the officers, you know, not by us, but by the officers. And then one of the officers would catch, catch it with a cigarette or a cigar and start blowing the bubbles so she got down to one, one front and back, and then she'd disappear. (he laughs) So whether she had a, she had anything under that balloon, we never knew. We never could find out. But it, it, uh, gets your mind wandering, you know. Oh, but that was still, what elegant dancing those girls did, absolutely elegant. So our parties would usually

last till, uh, eleven thirty, twelve o'clock at night, you know. And there'd be maybe around about fifty, sixty people out there, officers, you know, and their families, and, uh, we had one wonderful time. And then, of course, we supplied big pans of chicken and potato salad and cake, layer cake, with a real nice icing on it, you know. And, uh, then, uh, that was one thing that those parties, they never had no liquor. It was unbelievable. All right. You can't really call beer liquor, you know. So we just, beer would suffice, you know. You could drink all you wanted.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you were sort of out on a lawn somewhere. What did the grounds look like? Were there flowers and trees around the Statue of Liberty?

PELASKE: Well, we had, we had a plot of grass that was around about, uh, three hundred feet long and about three hundred feet wide. And, uh, over near the, over near the, uh, officer's quarters there, there was a little bit of gardening but, uh, otherwise there was just a few trees around. And then the, uh, we called the patch of grass at three hundred by three hundred, we called that a parade ground. We never, I think only

once or twice in the whole time I was there, in the whole year I was there, that really we get the gang out there and do some marching, just in case. The captain wanted to make sure that we could get out there and do it, you know. But it really was unbelievable. It's just like we was drilling every day, because we were perfect, you know. We'd only do like a half an hour drilling, and the captain would say, "Good, very good. Dismissed." (Mr. Sigrist laughs) You know?

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about, you mentioned that the officers had families there. Tell me a little bit about the interaction of the men with the officers' families, if they had any interaction, with children or wives.

PELASKE: Well, no. We had, uh, very little, uh, personal connection with the officers. It was only just that we got to know them better by going over and painting in their quarters, you know, paint one room here and one room there.

SIGRIST: And you said these were older homes but well-maintained.

PELASKE: Oh, they were well-maintained. But they were, they were ninety-five to a hundred years old, at least. At least that much. But they were, uh, comfortable, they were warm, they had lots of windows, and, uh, the bedrooms were all on the second floor, and they were elegant, elegant bedrooms. Great, big spaces like you see in downtown New York in those fancy hotels, you know.

SIGRIST: And were they all in one spot on the island?

PELASKE: Uh, they were in a row. They started like about, uh, a hundred feet from where you got off the pier onto the mainland where the, uh, the fence said "Visitors This Way." From there on, about another hundred feet, and you'd come to the first officer's quarter. And all the officers' quarters were on the left hand side of the road. And on the right hand side we had, um, noncom quarters, for a non-commissioned officer. And a lot of the non-commissioned officers, um, worked over in Whitehall Street, or else they worked in Governor's Island, and they still lived in those, in these here buildings here. And they were nice quarters. They were very nice. And, um, of course, people had their own furniture, you know, and if a guy

got transferred, well, he'd just have to take and move everything down to the pier, off of the boat, over to the shore. Oh, what a rigmarole. We were glad when nobody moved.

SIGRIST: Were most people there for a short time, or were some people there for many years?

PELASKE: Most of the people were there for very many years, an average, I would say, of seven or eight years. And we had a couple of doctors who were there, and the rest were all, um, uh, over in governor's island, that was like the mainstay of New York area for, um, what you call the, um, armed forces, infantry, infantry plus. And, uh, they had, like, um, six, they had like six outfits there on Governor's Island. And also they had, um, the Castle Williams, which was housed about a hundred and fifty prisoners, of which thirty-five were lifers, they were there for life. They were federal prisoners, government. I mean, um, they were army prisoners, all army prisoners in there. And, uh, they, uh, they were always, uh, at hard labor. They always had hard labor for them guys. And the, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Was there a prison or something at the statue, too? Was there a jail area?

PELASKE: There was a jail in the statue, but it was never, ever used, to my knowledge.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing it?

PELASKE: And what it was, it was, in the back door of the statue, to the right took you to the room where the switchboard was for the statue lights, and to the left took you to the jail down the hall. And the jail had, uh, it was a double-cell jail, and it was around about, uh, two rooms, about ten by fifteen, and, uh, on the walls was writing of prisoners that had lived there, that had been incarcerated there. And the dates went back, uh, back before the 1900's. And I wish to heavens today I would be down there with my video camera taking pictures of it. But when the WPA came on the statue to refurbish the, uh, refurbish, the base of the statue had one column that was in trouble. So the WPA took it upon themselves to re-do that function of that one girder, and they took around about three, between three and four months. And, of course, all the materials come in on the back pier,

and was trucked by the truck up to the statue, and that was when the jail disappeared. They stole it for the iron. And nobody made, nobody, they said they could care less. Let them have it. Who cares? We don't use the jail. We don't need it. So who cares, you know. They just let it go like that, and that was the end of it. And, uh, I still, um, am curious, I'm hoping that I can get permission to go down on that part of the statue when I go over there tomorrow and, uh, maybe the walls didn't get painted in that area, and some of that there, uh, some of that writing on the walls is still there. It would be wonderful if it is, because there might be some names down there that had probably been forgotten about for, what, a hundred years? Because I'm eighty-one, you know, and 1912, back another twelve years, 1900. Uh, it's an awful long time.

SIGRIST: In our last two minutes, can you tell me how you left the Statue of Liberty?

PELASKE: Well, very reluctantly, uh, we got official notice from the army that, uh, they were going to discontinue our contingent being in the statue, and that we were going to move lock, stock and barrel to Fort Hamilton,

New York. That's, uh, down in Fourth Avenue, the end of the Fourth Avenue subway, and it's about six blocks from there, a six-block walk over to Fort Hamilton proper. And in there they had the barracks for the military police and, I don't know, there was another barracks there, I never paid much attention to it. And they also had, uh, the horses there, too. But, uh, we had to take and pile our bunks all on the truck, take them down to the pier and take them over from the boat, and then they were loaded onto a van and taken out to Fort Hamilton. But, uh, we left here, we left, uh, the island very reluctantly, I'm telling you. It was just like, oh, boy, sorry, pal. (he laughs) This is it, you know. And then to go over to this new life in Fort Hamilton and, uh, the officers with their polo ponies. I got a chance to drive the, I got advanced to drive the truck with all the refuse from the stable. (Mr. Sigrist laughs) I won't divulge the secrets of that, but, uh, then on, you know, until I was discharged, I got married and I had a child.

SIGRIST: And lots of grandchildren, and . . .

PELASKE: I was, oh, no, no. No grandchildren that quick.

SIGRIST: Not then, not then.

PELASKE: But, uh, that was the start of it anyhow.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Pelaske, I want to thank you very much. This has been a great interview, and you've just been filled with great information. I want to thank you for coming from California to do it.

PELASKE: I only hope that I've given you everything that, uh, would enhance the picture of the primitive life that was on the statue, which everybody was on their best behavior, you didn't need a policeman over there. It was absolutely wonderful.

SIGRIST: Great. Well, thank you again, Mr. Pelaske.

PELASKE: You're welcome, I'm sure, any time.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Charles Pelaske on Wednesday, December 29, 1993, at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.