

EI-594

WILLIAM WARREN

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COAST GUARD, ELLIS ISLAND, 1941

AGE: 23

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's April 7th, 1995, and I have the pleasure of being here today with William Carroll, C-A-R-R-O-L-L, Warren, who's here visiting from California. Mr. Warren was in the Coast Guard. He volunteered on November 22nd, 1940, in Seattle, Washington, for the Coast Guard. He was stationed here at Ellis Island on January 7th, from January 7th, 1941 to July of 1941, at which time he was transferred to the Battery, Captain of the Port Office. Well, it's a pleasure to talk with you. I'm very happy that you happened by, and somebody discovered that you had been stationed here, and we could have this interview. Let's start at the beginning: if you would give your birth date.

WARREN: Born March 4th, 1918, San Diego, California.

LEVINE: And did you live in San Diego?

WARREN: I lived there for one year, after World War One my parents moved to Island Park, a suburb of Los Angeles. At the age of eight, my family moved to Beverly Hills, California, which was in the West End, and I lived there all during my third grade 'til finishing high school in 1937 at Beverly Hills High School. And I worked for the US Post Office in Beverly Hills for three years after graduation. At the time the draft came into being, and I had no intentions of going in the Army, so I took off for Seattle, Washington, because I knew people up there, because at that time, the Coast Guard had just two recruiting stations: Salt Lake City, and Seattle, Washington, and I didn't know anybody in Salt Lake City. So I was in Seattle, Washington for

ten days when I joined up, and they sent us to Port Townsend, Washington for ten weeks of boot camp.

LEVINE: Well, just sort of to follow in chronology—why did you want to be in the Coast Guard?

WARREN: Well, I went to the Navy first, and they said it was six years [laughs].

LEVINE: [Laughs] I see!

WARREN: And I was twenty-two and a half years old, and that's a long time! So somebody told me about the Coast Guard, and it was a three year hitch. Well, I joined up with the Coast Guard for three years, but I did five years and five days.

LEVINE: Aha! Okay, so you were sent to boot camp, and do you remember, when you think of boot camp, what is it that stands out in your mind about it?

WARREN: Well, of course, that was my first trip away. I had never been out of California, and it was up at Port Townsend, Washington, which is on the Straits of Juan de Fuca coming into Puget Sound. And it was cold, it was rainy, and I was homesick. And at the end of six weeks of training, all of a sudden they said, "You're all going to New York." And they put us on a train. Nothing like the Army experience—we all had our own bunks or staterooms! And the train came cross-country, to Spokane, Minneapolis, Chicago, New York City. And the day we arrived here, which was the seventh day of January, was one of the most beautiful days I think I've ever seen in my life. It had snowed heavily the night before, and everything was pure white. And the train brought us into Jersey City, and a tugboat, the Hudson, and I think the other one was the Resolute, picked us all up, ninety-nine of us, and brought us over here. And I was enthralled with the beauty of the snow, not ever having been in it before. And the boys from the Midwest and the East said, "Wait 'til you see it the next day." [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs]

WARREN: Because everything at that time were all coal-burners: the trains, the boats. And when we arrived here, we had about one month that they didn't know what to do with us. So out on the—what would I call it, the north side of the island?

LEVINE: Facing Manhattan? Uh-huh, yeah.

WARREN: They had boat davits out there, and a playing field, and we'd go out there in the cold weather, just for something to do, we'd play softball. All we had

was one softball! And whoever hit it over the fence, in the water, had to go get it.

LEVINE: Did people have to actually go?

WARREN: And I did that once. So, because we were in dungarees, so immediately come back—we would come back and take a shower, and then go sick bay, and the doctor would clean out your nose and your ears [laughs], everything else. 'Cause I think all the sewage went right into the East River and the Hudson River at that time [laughs].

LEVINE: [Laughs] Well, now, so there were what, about a hundred of you?

WARREN: Well, that was a hundred from Seattle. There was lots of people here from all over, because it became a receiving station, and this is where they brought all the surfmen that were coming in from the West Coast. And they were eventually sent down to North Carolina, and that way to train our arch-rivals, the Navy, how to land a boat through the surf. Because the Coast Guard Surfmen were par excellence. So what we did, as time went on, we stood guard duty on British ships out at Gravesend Bay, while they loaded ammunition. That was the ammunition school they sent us to. Then we later went aboard the Normandy, which was a highly secret operation, and when we were sitting along side the Normandy, I think it was up around near Pier Eighty-three, Sunday afternoon, who should come on air but Mr. Walter Winchell, and said the Coast Guard was seizing the Normandy! [Laughs] Well, the Normandy was in good shape 'til the Navy took it over, and then you know what happened! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Well now, all the time, you were living at Ellis Island?

WARREN: We lived, we were in the barracks.

LEVINE: What were they like then?

WARREN: Well, it was just—the barracks was over in the old building.

LEVINE: The kitchen/laundry building.

WARREN: Do you know where the old laundry is?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WARREN: Well, back of that, as you went down that aisle, and around, our mess hall was there, and the barracks. And after standing guard duty in snow for a while, I did something that you're always told not to do: I volunteered. I said, this was no place for a California boy, to be doing this. So when a

Yeoman came through one day, and says, "Does anybody know how to type?" I put up my hand. He says, "Come with me, and get your gear." Well, I had a personalized room of my own, up there by the Administration Building, and my job was nothing to do all day but make up the Liberty List [laughs]. And I did that all through June, or July, when I was transferred over to work in the Captain of the Port Office at the Battery. And while stationed in the Battery, I met somebody that was going to San Francisco, and they needed somebody to drive out a panel truck. And they assigned me the job, and in late October I drove this panel truck to San Francisco.

LEVINE: Oh, well let's go back first to Ellis Island, and tell me what your duties were. The first month, nobody knew what to do with you, right?

WARREN: We just played.

LEVINE: Played. And then what happened?

WARREN: Well, as I say, then we became—we started doing the guard duty, and the later, we seized—went out and did guard duty on the Danish ships that were all tied up at Gravesend Bay. After that, oh, then we seized—which is the picture on the front of the *New York Daily News* in 1941. That's when they seized all the Italian ships which had been scuttled over on the Jersey shore. And that was all done, and I got off of all that kind of duty when they sent me into the office.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, say—is there any more that you could say for posterity about the enemy aliens, and what the Coast Guard mission was in relation to them?

WARREN: Well, that was just that one time that we had, brought in all those—which they were considered enemy aliens. They were all shipped to the Midwest in a POW camp on May 30th, 1941. And we didn't have to do anything with them while they were on the Island here.

LEVINE: I see. Are there any experiences that you can think of to relate as far as your own personal experience in doing that?

WARREN: Well, it was just curiosity more than anything else, that we didn't have to get involved with them except when we were out there when they were loading them on tugboats. And of course the islands, when we arrived here, were very bleak, and as I can still see on the old building, there's still the ivy plants are on the building. And when spring came, it became an enjoyable place to be, because everything was so nice and green.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. Now, did you go off from Ellis Island very often?

WARREN: Oh, we took every chance we could get! [Laughs] I was very fortunate; I had an aunt who lived at Fifty-Fifth and Park Avenue, and they used to kid me—that's the only one they knew who was making twenty-one dollars a month, and living on Park Avenue! I would stay up there when I didn't have to come back. I come in on the morning, and one morning I missed the—that's the only time I was reprimanded in the service—I missed the last boat, at eight o'clock, the ferry boat into the island.

LEVINE: I know that feeling. So, what about the Coast Guard? How did you come to feel about being in the Coast Guard?

WARREN: The Coast Guard I enjoyed very much. I traveled the entire world. I spent almost a year in New York City here, and then two years in San Francisco, and I was over the entire South Pacific: Australia, New Guinea, the Philippines. And in 1945 we left the Philippines in June, came to New York in July, and it was like a cruise, because coming through the canal once we cleared, the European war was over, and we could smoke on deck, and keep the portholes open. And we went to Leghorn, Italy, which is just of Pisa, to pick up Fifth Army troops, to take them back for the Japanese invasion. And the war ended while we were there. And we took those troops into Boston, and then from Boston we went to Calcutta, India, and picked up Army Air Corps people, and brought them back to New York in October of 1945. And when we were tied up at Hoboken, I was regular service, so I was approximately the twelfth of November, which gave me ten days of my enlistment left, and I asked for ten days leave en route, which the Personnel Officer on the ship would not give to me. And he transferred me to the Third Naval District, and I got in there and asked for ten days, and they wanted to know who that I thought I was, that a lot of people want out. And being a Yeoman, I could type, and that's what they wanted to discharge people. So they transferred me to Ellis Island. But my memory served me correct; I remembered an officer I had in San Francisco, that he was in the Third Naval District. His name was Commander Salenberger. And he was in the Pay Office. And I went up to see him, and he remembered me. And he had given me my first promotion in the service as a Petty Officer. And I told him my problems [laughs], I wanted to go home. Because in the meantime, I was married, I had a child. And he said, "Well, you know how it is between Personnel and Pay and Supply." And I says, "Tell me." But he did get my transfer killed, and I got my ten days leave, and I stayed in New York 'til the twenty-second of November, which at that time I came into Church Street, the Separation Center, and I said, "What do I have to do to get out here?" And he said, "Do you know anybody?" And I said, "Yes." And from Church Street Separation Center, they sent me to Brooklyn for discharge, and I was discharge November 27th, 1945.

LEVINE: And your rank at that time?

WARREN: I was a First Class Yeoman, First Class Petty Officer.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, what was going on at Ellis Island in 1945 when you were re-assigned?

WARREN: It was a receiving station again, bringing men through from other, you know, from other places.

LEVINE: You mean, this is servicemen who were wounded?

WARREN: On their way home, not necessarily.

LEVINE: Not necessarily wounded, uh-huh.

WARREN: But it was continually where men would come in from overseas, or come in from the West Coast, or whatever. And then they would be assigned out to other places.

LEVINE: I meant to ask you earlier: who was the Commander of your unit, when you were stationed at Ellis Island?

WARREN: I wish I could remember his name. He was a Lieutenant, Senior Grade, the C.O. And he should have been much higher ranked, but he had had a drinking problem, and he had been a flyer, and his father had been the Commandant of the Coast Guard in Washington D.C. at one time, which I guess saved his career. And so he was out of line of promotion at the present time then. He lived in Staten Island with his family. But he was a wonderful man. He was great to all of us. But I don't remember his name. I mean, you know, that's fifty-four years ago!

LEVINE: Yeah, that's okay [laughs]. Now were there other people that you were friendly with that you kept some connection with afterwards?

WARREN: Not that when I was stationed here. One man, yes I did. His name was—he was from Long Beach, California, and I met him the day we signed in the service. And his name, Sid Paulsen, P-A-U-L-S-E-N. We used to call him the dumb Swede. But his family were all seagoing people, and after the Coast Guard, he went in the merchant marine. And then he became—he was a Boson's Mate, First Class, and he went through the Normandy invasion on the European side, where I was in the Pacific. And we kept in touch until he died twenty-five years ago. But he later became a Captain in the Naval Reserve, and he was in charge of the Naval missile tracking ships. But that is the only individual that I ever kept in contact with.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, at this point in your life, when you look back on your Coast Guard career, how do you view it, with hindsight?

WARREN: I'm very proud that I was in it. People always, you know, they called us shallow water sailors. But we did as much as any Navy sailor ever did. And I have a group—I live in a retirement village, more or less retirement, and there's about fifteen of us that were in the Coast Guard. So when the boys all start reminiscing about World War Two, with the Marines, the Army, or the Air Corps, we pretty well stand up and hold our own.

LEVINE: And how about when you got out? Just briefly, what kind of a career did you have in life?

WARREN: Well, when I was discharged here in Brooklyn, I immediately took the subway, or the El, I guess it was, from South Ferry up to Grand Central Station, and where I'm staying right above that right now, at the Grand Hyatt. And I went over to get my ticket, and the lady says, "You'll have to get in the other line." And I says, "Why? This is for servicemen?" She said, "Well, I see you're discharged." I said, "I've been out one hour!" [Laughs] So she finally did sell me the serviceman's ticket. I went home, picked up my wife and child in San Francisco, where she was staying with her mother, and went home to Beverly Hills, and lived with my parents for almost a year, because of the housing situation. And I went to work at that particular time, what they called—I worked in the office of the Biltmore Garage in downtown Los Angeles. Then I went back to school at night at UCLA, and that lasted about a year, with another child on the way! And I finally went into retail sales in 1951, with the Broadway Department Store, and became a buyer with them, eventually, and wound up as a store manager. And I retired in 1960—oh, pardon me, at sixty-three, in 1981. I had a wonderful career.

LEVINE: Great. Now what is your wife's name?

WARREN: My wife's name is Berthile. It's B-E-R-T-H-I-L-E. Her middle name is Eugenie. Her last name was Donovan.

LEVINE: [Laughs] How do you spell Eugenie?

WARREN: E-U-G-E-N-I-E. The French themselves do not pronounce it that way. But her mother was all French. Her father was all Irish. And she's a San Francisco girl.

LEVINE: And how about your children, what are their names?

WARREN: I have Robert, who is with me, is my youngest child. My oldest child Sandy, and my middle child Judy, and as I say, Bob is my youngest. Their ages are forty-six, forty-eight, and fifty.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how does it feel to you, coming back to Ellis Island today?

WARREN: Very humble. It gives me a funny feeling, and I'm a very sentimental person to begin with. I have a hard time at weddings, with my grandchildren, and even when my kids got married! [Laughs] And this place was my first station, out of boot camp. As I say, I've talked about it for years, and for Christmas my son and daughter-in-law put this trip together for us, and we're their guests for the whole trip.

LEVINE: That's beautiful. What a beautiful gift!

WARREN: Isn't it, though? He says, "I knew, Dad, you wanted. And I heard you say you didn't want to go back by yourselves." And so he put it all together, and we've been having a ball.

LEVINE: Wonderful! Okay, I think we'll pause here. [Tape off/on] Okay, we're resuming now. David Castles, who is an ex-Coast Guard stationed at Ellis Island and has been listening to this came in and suggested a few things that we might go back to. One was the actually Commander who was here—it seems like he was the son—

WARREN: The son of the Coast Guard Commandant.

LEVINE: Right. And so what was his name?

WARREN: I don't remember his first name. Well, it was Waesche.

LEVINE: How do you spell it—W-A--?

WARREN: It'd probably be W-A-E-S-C-H-E. But I think that what's—being his father was the Commandant—that saved his career.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But you said he was a very nice person.

WARREN: Wonderful man.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences in particular where you had any dealings with him while you were here?

WARREN: Yes, he gave me a Captain's Mast that time I was late getting back, and that was the only reprimand [laughs]!

LEVINE: What's that mean, a Captain's Mast?

WARREN: Well, that's the least you can get. Then you go from a—well, I forget what the other one is, then a court martial. But the Captain's Mast is just put into your Personnel File for a minor infraction [laughs].

LEVINE: I see, I see.

WARREN: And he was a very understanding individual.

LEVINE: Well, how about the ferry slip, and the loading and unloading of individuals that you were involved with?

WARREN: Well, most of the—of course, most of the people that were riding the ferry slip were employees, US Public Health Service. The hospital was staffed by US Public Health Service. Then there was the merchant marine people that came in there for hospitalization. And the employees, and of course all the servicemen that were stationed on the Island. And I spent four days—I contracted German measles about a month after I got here, and spent five days over there in the hospital.

LEVINE: What was that like, your hospital experience?

WARREN: It was nice; it was very austere. But as I said, it was a lot of people worked on the island, and were back and forth. Now, the Commanding Officer, he lived on Staten Island. And I ran a few things for him, and that was one of my first experiences between an enlisted man, a commissioned officer, and his family, and they were very nice to me.

LEVINE: Were there staff living on the hospital islands, that you had any contact with?

WARREN: That I don't remember, but looking at all those houses out there, they must have.

LEVINE: Yeah. I wondered if you as a Coast Guard had any--?

WARREN: We never went over there. We had to stay all on our side of the Island.

LEVINE: And how about the food, the dining facilities?

WARREN: Well, it was one large mess hall, and along side of it was all our bunks. And that's when you were assigned to the barracks there. As I told you previously, when I was transferred up to the office, I got a private room. And the mess hall and the galley, the kitchen, was a large place down right next to it, and with communal showers next to that. And I was only

assigned duty there once, very luckily, and I put all the potatoes into the peeling machine. We didn't have to do it by hand. And I made like little new potatoes out of them, so I didn't have to take the eyes out of them. And that's the last time he ever assigned me to mess duty. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Okay, is there anything else you can think of, experiences regarding the food, or the--?

WARREN: I'd say, overall, we ate good. I mean, we never had any complaints. And that was one of the main reasons I was either going into the Navy, or going into the Coast Guard: because you had clean sheets, good food, and it was most of the time warm barracks [laughs]. So you weren't in the mud, or anything else [laughs].

LEVINE: Well now, how is this phase of your life?

WARREN: This phase: I've been retired now fourteen years. I have traveled to Hong Kong. I had a daughter and my son-in-law living there for two years, and we spent several months there, and had a ball. We have taken three cruises, Mediterranean cruises. Or pardon me, the Caribbean, through the Canal. We've taken cruises down to Mexico. And I used to live, where I retired from, is Ventura, California, south of Santa Barbara. And we thought we would never live there, because I've always lived near the water. And we met people that had a place near Palm Springs, but not in the hot weather. It's a little village called Cherry Valley. Unincorporated—we have one traffic signal. And it's horse country, and orchards. And it's only grown about, in the fourteen years I've lived in the area, it's only grown about three thousand people. And I live in a mobile home village, which I thought I would never do, but we enjoy it. And I live on the third fairway of the golf course. I have my own golf cart, and when I want to play golf, I just get in my golf cart and go down. It costs me nothing [laughs].

LEVINE: Wonderful! Well, I want to say thank you so much for a most interesting story.

WARREN: Well, it's my pleasure.

LEVINE: And I'm so happy that we were able to see you today. And now this will be a part of the archives, the oral history collection of Ellis Island.

WARREN: Good. And I took pictures of the board out there, because I friend of mine came through here in 1928 from France whose name is Paul Lehrer. And he's listed out there on Plaque two forty-nine, and so I took a picture of it so I can take it back to him.

EI-594/WARREN

LEVINE: Wonderful, wonderful! Okay, well this is Janet Levine. It's April 7th, 1995. I'm here with William Warren, and he was a Coast Guard stationed here for the first seven months of 1941. Thank you.

[End of Interview]