

EI-085

RICHARD MILLER AND ROBERT ILES

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COAST GUARDSMEN AT ELLIS ISLAND

1941, 1943

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, September 4th, 1991. We're here at Ellis Island with Robert Iles, who was stationed here in the Coast Guard in the summer of 1943 and then briefly in 1946, and also with Richard Miller, who was stationed here in the Coast Guard between December of 1941 and April of 1942. This is a rather unusual circumstance. Brian Feeney and I will be doing the interviewing and Janet Levine is running the equipment.

Good morning, gentlemen.

ALL: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Let's start, Bob, if you could give me your full name and your date of birth.

ILES: My full name is Robert Thomas Iles. I was born on August the 14th, 1921.

SIGRIST: And where were you born, sir?

ILES: I was born in Philadelphia.

MILLER: And my name is Richard L. Miller, and I was born on March 28th, 1918, in Trenton, New Jersey.

SIGRIST: Why don't we just start, very quickly, we'll start with you, sir. Tell us a little bit about how you got into the Coast Guard.

ILES: I volunteered to join the Coast Guard on a four year term and that was right prior to the war. I entered the Coast Guard on October 3, 1941.

SIGRIST: Why did you make this decision?

ILES: No particular reason that I know of. I didn't have enough teeth to get into the Navy, so I went to the Coast Guard.

SIGRIST: That's a good reason, I guess.

ILES: Originally I wanted to join the cavalry, so I went to the Army and they told me I'd have to go out to Fort Reilly, Kansas and would probably end up in a tank since they were getting rid of the cavalry. I had a friend who was in the Coast Guard and he told the wild tale of chasing a submarine with a sub-machine gun. It sounded interesting. Beside that, I got my

greetings from Uncle Sam, so I went and enlisted in the Coast Guard and left for boot camp, I believe it was August the 26th, 1942. I was in the Coast Guard Reserve.

SIGRIST: I see. And where was the boot camp?

ILES: The boot camp was in Curtis Bay, Maryland which is also, it's still being used as a Coast Guard yard where they repair their ships.

SIGRIST: And how long were you in boot camp?

ILES: I was in boot camp I think about five weeks. I know for the first three weeks we had no clothing other than a sweater from the Red Cross, and I was wearing a pair of brown and white oxfords for three weeks, marching in them and using the same pair of socks. So it was a little difficult. When the clothing come in, I volunteered to help give it out, and they gave us a half hour. So I got everything that fit pretty well.

SIGRIST: Sir? Did you follow a similar pattern? Did you go into boot camp first?

MILLER: Yes. I went into Boot Camp at Algiers, Louisiana, and was in boot camp from the early part of October until my assignment here on Ellis Island in December.

SIGRIST: Can you, why did you come to Ellis Island? Why did they send you here as opposed to some other place?

MILLER: Because they gave me a choice of different lines to follow in the Coast Guard and I chose to be a quarter master and a signalman. And here was the school. I came here to school, and through the quartermaster school, and then taught in the signal school for a short while.

SIGRIST: And when did you arrive here?

MILLER: I arrived here in about the middle of December some time of '41.

FEENEY: Could you explain a little what quartermaster school was about, and signal school?

MILLER: Well, the quartermaster aboard ship, and Bob can add to this I'm sure. The quartermaster primarily works on the bridge assisting, he's a helmsman. He could take care of the charts, keep the charts updated and keeps a log of the ship.

ILES: At sea usually the seaman's on the helm, but when you come into close quarters, general quarters, or you're in the port, it's usually one of the quartermasters would take the helm. And in the Coast Guard, since our ships were smaller than a lot of Navy ships, the quartermaster also did a lot of the

signalling. We also had signalmen on the bigger ships, but this is the primary reason why we were both quartermasters, but we went to signal school here.

FEENEY: Can you talk a little bit about signal school here at Ellis?

MILLER: Ooh. (he laughs) Bob, can you?

ILES: Well, I got here in early June of 1943 and we would sit in a classroom and, first of all, we had to learn morse code. And unlike a radio man who seems is always five digits or so behind when he's receiving, we had to do it visually. And we had to learn the morse code. We had a light up on the blackboard, and I had a lot of difficulty with it. When you're out at sea, you have a light that has a shutter, and it cuts the light off immediately, where this light seemed to die out, and it bothered me. We would then go out on either side of the ferry slip and have Sumafor. What you did when you signalled, whether it would be Sumafor or a blinker, you had someone there that was a writer right behind you, so you would use the alphabet, like Able, Baker, Charlie and whatnot, which have changed today, and they would write it down, so you didn't have to see something and then right it. When you signal you would get five digits at one time, and then you would, by light, in

morse code. If you read it correctly, you'd just flick the light and let the guy know that you got the signal correctly. If you didn't give him an answer in light, he would have to repeat it. But there were some signals that were given from ship to ship out at sea with a long barrel on the light so that no one could see that they were signalling, and you didn't give them an answer, so you had to get it.

SIGRIST: Now, you said you lined up on the ferry . . .

MILLER: On either side of the ferry slip for Sumafor, so that it was too far away, you couldn't shout, and when they gave a test, whatever you told your writer, that's what your answer was.

FEENEY: Do you remember training indoors for Sumafor?

MILLER: Only amongst ourselves. Not, there was no training that I recall indoors. I don't even recall any bad weather.

FEENEY: Do you recall, on the first floor of what was the dormitory building here at Ellis, and I'm sure it had a similar function for the Coast Guard, on the walls there, are, you know, the Sumafor flags painted throughout the halls. Do you remember seeing those there, and compass points, and things like that? They're still down there.

MILLER: I'd like to see them. I can't . . .

ILES: I don't remember them.

MILLER: I don't remember them.

FEENEY: We've tried to find someone that remembers why they were painted on there, and maybe what they were used for. One Coast Guardsman thought that that area, since it's a large open area, was used as a drill shed, and that maybe they just painted them on the wall there to kind of reinforce it to the men as they were drilling. And I thought . . .

ILES: Uh-uh.

SIGRIST: So everything was done outside.

MILLER: Everything that I can remember was done outside. Now, when you get together with some of the guys, you might want to bone up on something, and you'd do a little bit of Sumaforing with your fingers, or something like that, and, uh, just for a lark. Sumafor was the easiest for me to get.

ILES: For me, too.

SIGRIST: When you say blinkers, did they wheel big lights?

MILLER: No. Not for, in our class we had a light over the

blackboard and somebody would tap it out, just like a radio, and tap it out in morse code. And what you had to learn was when you saw dit-dot, which was A, you didn't say, "Dit-dot, that's A." When you saw it, that was an A. (he laughs) I mean, that was . . .

ILES: You had to think in that language.

MILLER: And when you're at sea and the ship's pitching it gets, sometimes the other ship disappears and you can't see it, it's a little rough.

FEENEY: So how long did that sort of training take before it was complete?

ILES: I'd say about six weeks.

MILLER: I was here three months.

SIGRIST: And that's what you did that duration of time.

MILLER: We would start, you had to be here at eight o'clock Monday morning. And after inspection on Saturday you were free for the weekend unless somebody got in trouble. I mean, so you could go home or whatever you wanted. And coming back we were talking, coming back Sunday night if you missed the last ferry, which I did once. I slept on a straight-backed chair in the

Seaman's Institute or some place down in the lower Bowery. (he laughs)

ILES: And I had a similar experience. I slept on a park bench over in South Battery.

SIGRIST: And what time was the last ferry?

ILES: I think it was at eleven. It was either eleven or twelve, but I think it was eleven.

FEENEY: Was security very tight getting back and forth at that point.

ILES: No, not to my knowledge.

MILLER: No, no.

FEENEY: And do you remember what kind of ferry boat you took? Was it the ferry boat to Ellis Island?

MILLER: Yes.

ILES: Yes. It was the Ellis Island, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that boat?

MILLER: It was a double-end job, wasn't it?

ILES: Yeah, it was a double-end. Small one.

MILLER: It was small.

ILES: They weren't carrying cars back and forth, and it was free. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: What did it look like?

MILLER: A ferry boat.

ILES: Yeah, just a small ferry boat. Not as large as, not near as large as the Staten Island Ferry.

FEENEY: Was it in good shape at that point? Was it well-maintained?

ILES: I would say . . .

MILLER: Yeah. I would think so, yeah.

ILES: Reasonably well, yes.

SIGRIST: Who rode on this ferry boat other than the Coast Guard people?

ILES: I would imagine any one from, of course, there wasn't a lot of shipping going in and out of here for the Marine Hospital, and I don't have too much background on that hospital. But I imagine if anyone that was on a foreign military ship

that might be important. I'm imagining. I don't know this for a fact, but it would be logical, they'd probably be taken to the Marine Hospital. The other people on the ferry were either the people that worked here . . .

MILLER: That's right.

ILES: Or whatever Coast Guardsmen were going back and forth.

SIGRIST: Did you have a lot of interaction with people who worked here on the island?

MILLER: No.

ILES: Uh-uh.

MILLER: No. And we couldn't get off during the week that we were in school. You couldn't go over in New York in the evening. You were stuck here for that week, as far as I remember.

FEENEY: At this point, what was the Coast Guard presence like here at Ellis? Was it the dominant presence here, or were you just, like, confined to a small part of the island in lieu of other activities.

MILLER: I thought we were confined to a small part of the island. That was my feeling.

ILES: I agree with that.

MILLER: And there was quite a few people in the immigrant section, and we'd see them outside playing soccer, some with shoes on and some without. And they were pretty good soccer players because that's the international sport. And when we were out in our part of the yard there was a fence between our part and their part and we weren't supposed to have anything to do with them, and as I mentioned to Paul, while I was here there was, before the war there was a thing called a bund in the United States, and these were . . .

SIGRIST: How do you spell that, please?

MILLER: B-U-N-D. And there was a fellow named Fritz Coon who was the head, the honcho of this bund. And these are people who were backers of Hitler in this country. And the word got around that his secretary was incarcerated here on the island, and she was supposed to be a real, a real good-looking gal. And the word was you'd probably get court marshalled if you're caught talking to her. I don't think anybody saw her except in their imagination (they laugh), so I really don't know if she was here.

FEENEY: The immigrants that were here at that time, as best

you recall, were they mostly detainees, or what reason were immigrants here.

MILLER: I have no idea.

FEENEY: So you really had no contact with them.

ILES: Another thing, though, on December 7th, Pearl Harbor Day, at that time there were a lot of Japanese people living in New York City. And the Coast Guard here went along with Secret Service people to round these Japanese citizens up and they brought quite a few of them here.

FEENEY: Were you on Ellis at that time?

ILES: Yes.

FEENEY: Did you participate in that activity?

ILES: Just a little, not much. We went on one trip with Secret Service and I can remember very well them saying, "Now, on, say, the fifth floor there will be a Japanese doctor and his family." We'd go up and we'd take them and bring them back here.

FEENEY: How did you feel about having to do that sort of duty?

ILES: I didn't, I felt, one thing, I had the allegiance, I

took the oath that we'd do it for the country, which I think was okay. But I don't think we really should have done all of it. They knew so much about them, they should have been able to weed the bad ones from the good ones.

FEENEY: These people that were rounded up, do you recall if they were brought to Ellis Island at that point?

ILES: Some of them were brought to Ellis Island, yes. I know the ones that I had anything to do with were.

MILLER: I think what you have to remember, at that time, especially on the West Coast, if I remember the newsreels, the only way you could see what was going on was to go to the movies and see Fox Movietone News, or the newspapers. Right after Pearl Harbor, and then we had Wake Island and all the atrocities that were going on, the people on the West Coast seemed to be all really upset. And this probably precipitated a lot of it that had President Roosevelt call for their incarceration. And what had happened at Pearl Harbor, especially with the Arizona turning over, and all those guys caught in the Arizona, this had people very, very upset. The strange part of it is it was easier to pick out the Japanese because they looked a little different. There was probably a lot of Germans running around here, but they didn't do anything about that. And I would say

people generally were in favor of it at that time. When you look back on it you can have a little more compassion, but at that time people were, you know, the Japanese were hated.

ILES: They were the baddies.

MILLER: You bet.

SIGRIST: And you've both said that there were actually quite a few immigrants here when you were both here.

ILES: Well, there were people there. I don't know if they were immigrants, seamen.

MILLER: That's right.

ILES: I didn't see many women. Mostly what I saw were men.

FEENEY: But when you say you were confined to a small part of the island, what areas did that include, as best as you can remember?

ILES: (he sighs) Well, we had our mess deck. There was a brig, which I wasn't in. There was a classroom. There was a yard where we played softball. And we had our shower facilities, and a large room where we slept. We slept in doubled-tiered bunks.

SIGRIST: Describe that room a little bit. A big room?

ILES: Yeah, it was a big room.

MILLER: It was quite a large room, yes.

FEENEY: Was it in the dormitory building, the big dormitory building on the north end?

ILES: I thought it was and, uh, I think it was because when we walked out, you walked out into a yard where you could have a catch or whatever or just lounge around in the nice weather, and there was this high chain-link type fence between that yard and the area where the internees were playing soccer. So I assume that that was right. We slept in double-tiered bunks, and one thing I do remember, the only officer I remember was a fellow who I was told was in the German Navy in World War I. He was a Coast Guard, I think he was a lieutenant. He had a guttural voice, a German accent. And one day during the lunch time the guys had pushed a sack back so they could lean back like an easy chair, and two guys were sitting in one bunk leaning back. And he got after them. He told them if he ever caught them doing that again, two men in a bunk was taboo, and if you ever get caught here again I'll have you court marshalled. I just remember that. I wasn't one of the two. (he laughs) But, I mean, this is, there was nothing to it. They were just sitting

there talking, but since the two of them were in a bunk, he let them have it. And he was the only officer I remember, and I don't remember his name.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of, were you all in this one room, or were there a series of rooms?

MILLER: All of our group was in one room at the time I was here, yes.

ILES: All our class was in. Whether others were to, I have a hunch others were too.

MILLER: Because a room would be too big for, because our class was about thirty-eight guys, and I don't think, there was more people than that in that room.

FEENEY: And you think it was on the ground level.

ILES: I think it was.

MILLER: I thought it was. Now, the fellow that couldn't make it today said he felt that our mess deck was on the second level. I don't remember that. I don't remember going up steps.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about the mess deck. What did that look like?

ILES: Well, it was just tables and a serving area.

MILLER: Yeah, well, this was in a large room when I was here. And they were, here on the island in the Coast Guard we were really big in athletics, especially in boxing and in basketball. And there was a ring built right at the far end of the mess deck. There at the time, let's talk just for a minute about the athletics, because I remember that Ryder College in Trenton had, of which I was a graduate, but they had a championship basketball team, and the whole team signed into the Coast Guard and were stationed here as a unit and we could beat anybody around. We were playing the top college teams.

SIGRIST: Where was the basketball court?

MILLER: That I don't remember. I think it was somewhere around the mess deck, but I'm not a hundred percent sure of that. And they had, I remember the boxing team. We had a real top notch boxing team. We had a world champion, Marty Serveau. We had another one, another fellow that was a world champion. I don't know, I think, they called him Herkimer, and he came from Herkimer, New York. And I think it was Lou Ambers, but I'm not sure at that time.

ILES: Lou Jenkins?

MILLER: No.

ILES: Because he was a boxer. I was stationed with him down on the beach.

MILLER: No. Not that I . . .

ILES: Okay.

MILLER: I think this was Lou Ambers, I believe. And then we, they trained here, and there was always boxing going on on the deck there with the boxers and trainers. We also had a heavyweight champion who was golden gloves champ.

SIGRIST: So this was very popular here.

MILLER: It was, at that particular time.

ILES: Jack Dempsy, who was a heavyweight champ, at the beginning of the war was a, as part of the athletic program, was made a commander in the Coast Guard. When I was in boot camp, my chief was a fellow named Herb Jaffey, and Herb Jaffey was an Olympic ice skating champion from the United States.

MILLER: Uh-huh.

ILES: So the Coast Guard was interested in athletics, but at the time that I was here the only athletics I remember is what I

participated in, which was softball, amongst the fellows in our class. Now, there may have been others on the island I played against, but there was nothing organized that I can recall.

SIGRIST: We're also talking about two different seasons and two different years. You're here in the winter, and you're here in the summer.

ILES: That's right.

MILLER: And that's why his Sumafor classes were out on the ferry slip. It was too cold out there when I was here.

SIGRIST: I see. What else did you do for recreation here on the island? You had organized sports of one sort. What else was there to do?

MILLER: Well, you were kept quite busy, and I didn't go home on weekends usually. We just couldn't. And we could go into New York City, which we did.

SIGRIST: Did they show you movies out here on the island?

MILLER: Yes. We had movies.

SIGRIST: Where did they show you the movies?

MILLER: I . . . I don't remember where.

ILES: I think we had movies, but I can't recall either.

FEENEY: Do you remember a large recreation hall where the movies might have been shown, more toward the area where the Marine Hospital was?

MILLER: I don't recall.

ILES: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did any celebrities ever come out to the island to entertain?

MILLER: Not that I was aware of.

ILES: But we went to the U.S.O. and things of that nature in the city.

SIGRIST: I see.

FEENEY: Were you free to go to the city when, you know, you were off duty?

MILLER: Weekend pass, or a daily pass on Saturdays or Sundays.

ILES: Not during the week. I couldn't go during the week.

MILLER: The people that were stationed here permanently may have had, you know, they could have port and starboard liberty.

They could go over every night, or however they worked it, I'm sure, but we couldn't.

FEENEY: Was there very strict security here at Ellis? For instance, did either of you ever pull guard duty when you were here?

ILES: I had a lot of guard duty out on the sea wall and that was cold. It was cold.

MILLER: I didn't. I didn't have any.

SIGRIST: What were you guarding again? What were they . . . Just something to do? (they laugh)

ILES: Keep you out of mischief. It was training.

FEENEY: Did the Coast Guard ever perform guard duties in other parts of the harbor?

ILES: Yes. When I was here the Normandy was on fire up on one of the docks. And we sent quite a few Coast Guardsmen up there for guard duty for that fire.

FEENEY: Was there any firefighting duty for the Coast Guard involving that incident, or was it just guard duty?

ILES: No, just guard duty as far as I know.

SIGRIST: You mentioned, Bob, seeing ocean liners, too. Not on fire.

ILES: No. Well, the Queen Elizabeth, the original old three-and-four-stacker, The Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary used to go out with, I'd say, eighteen to twenty-thousand troops. And since they were faster than any convoy, they went by themselves. And there was no way a submarine could get them unless it happened to be laying in wait and they went by their path. And one of the ships, as it neared England, was going at a good clip and it hit an English Coast Guard cutter, cut it in half and kept right on going. Of course you couldn't stop to pick anybody up. I mean, you could be jeopardizing all the rest on the ship. But I remember seeing them go out painted that dark gray and here in that loud, that throaty whistle, I can still picture it in my mind or hear it in my mind. It was a real thrill to see those ships.

SIGRIST: Was New York Harbor very busy in those days?

ILES: Well, I didn't have anything to compare it with.

MILLER: No. I was going to say . . .

ILES: To me it looked busy, coming from a small town.

MILLER: See, your convoys didn't normally form off of New

York. They'd form off of Halifax, off of Norfolk and places like that so that you . . .

ILES: I really couldn't say.

SIGRIST: Should we talk a little bit . . . Do we have to pause for a second? Let's talk a little bit about what's going on on the island? Were there cars on the island? Did anyone have any vehicles on the island?

ILES: I don't remember.

MILLER: I never remember seeing any.

SIGRIST: I also wanted to ask you, your officers, did any of them live on the island? Obviously . . .

ILES: Not to my knowledge.

MILLER: You mean with their families?

SIGRIST: Yes.

MILLER: I don't know. Not to my knowledge. Unless they would have been in houses, or behind the Marine Hospital, I have no knowledge of that.

FEENEY: Do you remember your commanding officer at the time?

MILLER: Well, the only one I remember is our chief instructor who was a navy chief signalman who had come back into the Coast Guard as a chief signalman. His name was Crockett. I don't remember his first name. But the officers that were here were not really our officers. Because we all came from different naval districts. There were three of us that came from the fifth. I came from the Norfolk, the fifth naval district. Others came from the third, which was New York, the fourth Philadelphia. That's what our class was made up from. Now, from the Pacific area they probably had, no one came from that area. So we really had no officers. You were assigned here, you came here, reported in, and Chief Crockett was the one that would deal out the punishment and everything else.

FEENEY: Do you remember there being a commissioner of Ellis Island that was responsible for all the overall activities?

MILLER: No.

SIGRIST: We'll pause.

FEENEY: We're going to pause for just a moment.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Did either of you ever go to the Statue of Liberty at

all while you were here?

ILES: I did not, no.

MILLER: No, I didn't either. I don't believe, I may be wrong, but I don't think anyone, I don't think they ran tours to the Statue of Liberty, at least during the war. I may be wrong in that, but I don't remember seeing anything at, what do they call that, the Battery? Or whatever, I don't recall anyone getting on boats to go sightseeing at the Statue of Liberty.

SIGRIST: I see. And there was no reason why you would have to be detailed over there for any reason.

MILLER: No, no.

FEENEY: Or guard duty or anything like that.

MILLER: No.

SIGRIST: Brian asked about the security on the island a little while ago. Did anyone sneak off the island illegally? Did any of your buddies get off during the week to get into New York, and get into trouble for it or . . .

ILES: Not unless they could walk on water. (they laugh)

MILLER: I don't know of any.

ILES: I don't know of any.

FEENEY: So you couldn't get on the ferry without showing your pass, then?

ILES: I don't know because I never tried it.

MILLER: I don't know.

FEENEY: But do you remember that's how, that you had to show a pass when you got on the ferry?

ILES: I can't remember. See, the other thing, when you're here, one of the things that you would, you're at school, you want to go to sea, and you'd like to have a rating. And quartermaster was a very respective rating. In those days you had right arm ratings and you had left arm ratings. Today in the Navy and the Coast Guard it's all left arm. So it would be the same as in the Army. You have a sergeant, but then you have a tech sergeant who might be a cook or a machinist. The same thing was true. In the Navy and Coast Guard you had your machinist mates, your motor machinist mates, your electricians, radio men. They were all left arm. The line, the line type, which would be the same as a gunnery sergeant in the army, would be your gunner's mates, your fire control and your quartermaster signalmen boson mate. And, so when you went aboard ship if

there was, which happened to me, there was an upper sack and a (?), and there was one down below. Well, I was a quartermaster, so I got the upper one. (he laughs) So, I mean, that's, so you wanted that rating. You'd jeopardize it if you'd go, if you'd try to go ashore. Now, there's always guys in the service that try stuff, just like there are in civilian life. But I don't think it was difficult to go by the rules. I never had any trouble.

SIGRIST: It sounds like a rather lax atmosphere, actually, compared to other military operations.

ILES: Well, it was here because it's like Alkatraz. (he laughs) Where are you going to go? You didn't have that bridge.

SIGRIST: Yeah, that's true. Talk about the Marine Hospital at all. Did either of you have any interaction with the . . .

ILES: I did not have any.

MILLER: I had a scrape on the knee. I think it was from softball and I went over to get, whether it was a tetanus shot or to get, stop the bleeding. I don't remember. But I just went in there and it was taken care of right inside the front door practically, so I have no . . . One thing that might be

mentioned, however, in the Marine Hospital the Coast Guards, on Coast Guard cutters, strictly Coast Guard cutters, the large ones, they carried doctors. The doctors were Public Health doctors. They weren't Navy doctors. In the Marine Hospital the doctors were Public Health Service doctors. At least I think I'm right on that.

SIGRIST: Did any of them ever go to you as opposed you go to them? For instance, did you have physicals that you had to go through in your dormitory or whatever?

MILLER: I don't recall any.

ILES: I don't recall any. You got one when you went in, you got one when you went out, and that was it.

SIGRIST: Hmm. Do either of you remember what you ate here? Did they feed you well?

MILLER: Beans on Saturday morning. (he laughs) The only reason I knew there was a brig here was I noticed, I could see they had fellows who were tending the lawns, and they had their blues on with white paint with a big P on it, and these were Coast Guardsmen on the brig. (he coughs) Excuse me. And then I'd see them when they'd come in for breakfast. They'd be in a separate section of the mess deck. You never had any

contact with them.

FEENEY: Now, you talked about having to do guard duty on the sea wall, Coast Guards, people tending lawns, things like that.

I'm trying to get a sense of . . .

MILLER: Prisoners.

FEENEY: Who was tending lawns?

MILLER: Prisoners.

FEENEY: The prisoners were tending the lawns. But who was really in charge of Ellis Island at that point? There seemed to be so many groups here at that point. I mean, did you have a sense of who the overall authority was here at that point, especially since the war had started?

ILES: No, because I don't know who was in charge. It could have been a, I would imagine it was a full lieutenant, maybe a lieutenant commander.

FEENEY: But do you think it was the Coast Guard who was in charge here at that point? Or was the immigration service, you know, the Justice Department? Did they seem to have more authority out here at that point?

ILES: I had no idea because I was only interested in the

quartermaster class, and we were an entity unto ourselves, and there was rules and regulations where you couldn't go that were posted, and I'm sure there were some officer's name there, but who was in charge. In most regular Coast Guard bases, and maybe this happened here later, on a Saturday there'd be especially a land base, you know, you'd have inspection, our inspection was our uniform because we didn't have to clean up in the head or anything else like that. Whoever was stationed here probably had those chores, but it wasn't us. It was probably a seaman that was just come in, and he was captain of the head, I guess, but I don't know that.

FEENEY: What sort of duty was Ellis Island considered? Was it considered bad duty to have to be, you know, assigned to Ellis Island, or was it really considered no different from any other place? I mean, was it, were you pulling good duty if you got sent to Ellis Island?

ILES: Well, I felt it was good because I wanted to go to sea and I wanted to go with a rating and quartermaster and trigmius . . . And a lot of people mix quartermaster with quartermaster in the Navy. An Army quartermaster who would shift to the Navy and do the same job would be a storekeeper. Where, and I thought it was intriguing. So I never thought of it that way. I didn't mind staying here for three months.

Where I came from, down on the beach in North Carolina, that was really boring. You ride a horse every night and there's nobody to talk to because there's nobody there but the Coast Guard.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about having to go to Ellis Island?

MILLER: I felt it was a step up. At the time that I, right at the outset of the war, the Coast Guard did not have the compliment that they normally would have. And consequently it was a good place to be, and every school you went to was a step up. And I figured if I had to be there I wanted to get the most out of it that I could get out of it, so I welcomed it.

ILES: One thing with the Coast Guard, when the war started, we mentioned before that the draftees would be, you'd see them in newsreel. They'd be driving a truck with the word "tank" on the side. America was isolationist. We weren't going to go to war. This happened with the Coast Guard. A lot of the ships the Coast Guard manned were converted from fishing trollers. Some were wooden. Some, like the (?), they figured it got too much ice and turned over and sunk. They never heard from it again. So there wasn't enough ships, there wasn't enough personnel, and I guess what Dick said, he went up the ranks real quick. He was in at the beginning. And in time of war the Coast Guard in those days was under the Treasury Department, and

as soon as war broke out we're under the Navy. A lot of the Navy ships were manned by the Coast Guard: your assault transports, your assault cargo ships, your LSTs, LCIs, all that stuff. We manned a lot of army ships also. The army had probably more ships than the navy when you really analyze it. The army, that's a lot of large fleet of ships. Some of your big transports were army transports that were manned . . .

FEENEY: Troops transports, or cargo, or . . .

ILES: These were assault transports, the one that took the assault, in other words, your transports were called AP's. If there was an assault transport which would go in off the beach they were APA's, and A meaning assault. And the cargo ships that would go in with them would be AKA, and AK would be a ship that might take cargo to Australia. The AKA would pick it up and take it to Guada Canal or wherever. And a lot of Coast Guards were on these. A lot of the Coast Guard who were on beach stations, these were surfmen, were pulled in at the beginning of the war, and they were the ones that were assigned a lot of the landing craft at Guada Canal. Not that, you know, maybe they didn't want to, but that's where they ended up. The Coast Guard also owned a lot of the old flush deck destroyers that they use to chase rum runners, I guess. And they were part of the fifty destroyers that President Roosevelt gave to England

in return for bases in Bermuda and places like that.

SIGRIST: Were there any other, all this talk about boats makes me think, were there any other boats docked on Ellis other than the Ellis Island ferry?

MILLER: No.

ILES: Not that I know of, no.

MILLER: Not while I was here.

SIGRIST: That was the only boat.

MILLER: The only one.

FEENEY: So your training here at Ellis, the school you attended here at Ellis, was solely classroom-type training then. There was no ship training involved.

MILLER: Oh, no.

ILES: No. It was one hundred percent classroom.

MILLER: Yep.

ILES: Classroom, and with me out on the . . .

SIGRIST: Standing on the ferry slip. (he laughs)

ILES: Wearing your skivvies. (they laugh)

FEENEY: So when did you get shipboard training?

MILLER: Well, I went right from here in April to the U.S.S. Icarus, and was on the Icarus for, till March of 1943. I got an appointment to the Coast Guard Academy.

FEENEY: And what duty did the Icarus have?

MILLER: It was convoy duty.

FEENEY: You mean, guarding convoys, or transporting . . .

ILES: That's right. Guarding convoys.

FEENEY: And then you received an appointment to the Coast Guard Academy?

ILES: Yes.

FEENEY: Where was that located?

ILES: In New London, Connecticut.

FEENEY: And what was your training there?

ILES: We had a hundred and twenty days of officer training and we graduated as an ensign.

FEENEY: And what ship were you assigned to after that?

ILES: After that I went to the U.S.S. Charlottesville, which was a patrol frigate number 25, which was later, within a year, given to Russia on lend-lease in Alaska. I was on the crew that, I was gunnery officer from Charlottesville to, you went up there, and then after that I came back to the States. I was re-assigned to the U.S.S. Peterson, 8 D.E., which I picked up in Yatsuka, Japan, right after the war.

FEENEY: The Charlottesville, when you turned that over to Russia, you say you did that in Alaska?

ILES: In Alaska. Cold Bay, Alaska. And it was cold there, too.

FEENEY: Were there a lot of ships being turned over at that point?

ILES: Quite a few.

FEENEY: At Cold Bay.

ILES: At Cold Bay, but at different times.

FEENEY: Uh-huh. Were there other, so there weren't other ships?

ILES: Not there at the time we were there.

FEENEY: What was the Russian crew like that took the ship from you? Do you remember them?

ILES: Yes, quite well. They, very, well, they were hand-picked. We'd go up there to teach them how to use the guns, and they knew as much about our guns as we did. They could shoot just as well, too, but that was my particular line, anyway, the gunnery. And consequently, that's about most that I know. And general living with them. There was quite some real amusing moments we would have with them.

FEENEY: Well, tell us about a few, if you remember.

MILLER: I think you ought to tell them also about the experience on the Icarus.

ILES: Well, on the Icarus we, on May of the following year we were headed to pick up a convoy down in Key West, and as we were going by Hatarus on a Sunday afternoon, a beautiful day, a torpedo goes off our stern, and consequently we had a skipper on that that was an old mustang, we called him, a man that came up through the ranks. And he was really good. And he maneuvered the Icarus around. We finally blew up the submarine. The sub came up out of the water at about a thirty-five degree angle.

Thirty-three men escaped out of the conning tower, and then the submarine sunk back down into the depths of the ocean and we picked up thirty-three men, thirty-three Germans. But one of them had a, was hit by our three-inch twenty-three gun, and it just completely amputated his leg. He died that evening, but we in turn turned over thirty-two Germans to the Marines down in Charleston.

FEENEY: So how long were the Germans on ship then, on board your vessel?

ILES: Just about a day from Sunday, well, maybe a day-and-a-half from Sunday to Tuesday morning, something like that.

FEENEY: Did you interact with them at all?

ILES: No. We locked them all together in our front compartment. Put a guard on the door, and nobody could talk to them.

FEENEY: Did the captain of the vessel make it off, or did he go down with the ship?

ILES: No, he went with the ship, I think. But now we were getting back to about the Russians.

FEENEY: Oh, right. The Charlotte.

ILES: That was quite interesting to really live with them. As I said, they were hand-picked people, and like we, for one thing, we had an interpreter. We took an interpreter with us. When we got up there, their interpreter was so good that we sent our interpreter back home. And they converted all the manuals for the engines and things, guns and everything else, converted them from English to Russian.

FEENEY: So these weren't just ordinary Russian seamen.

ILES: No.

FEENEY: Were the officers, perhaps?

ILES: Well, there was a complement of each. A complement of each. It was very interesting.

MILLER: All together I guess there, I think there was about seventy-two PF's, patrol frigates, that were made. I think the Coast Guard had all but two, and I think almost all of them went to the Russians at the end of the war. We gave them an awful lot.

SIGRIST: Now, Bob, you ended back up at Ellis Island a few years later. Kind of fill us in what happened when you left.

ILES: Okay. When I left, I went back to Norfolk and went

right aboard a ship called the Carrabasset. The Carrabasset had been a Navy fleet tug.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

ILES: Yes. C-A-R-R-A-B-A-S-S-E-T. Carrabasset. I have since found that there's a river, a small river in a little town in Maine. I guess that's where they got the name. But this had been a coal-burning tug that was launched in 1919. It had been converted to oil, and we got a three-inch gun, a couple twenties and some depth chargers, and we were on convoy duty in the Atlantic, mostly off of Cape Hatarus area. The worst part about it was the weather. I was on that ship for about six, seven months, and then I was transferred to an army base in Florida, teaching the Army how to handle Army ships that were called, they were called FP at that time, Freight and Personnel, but then they were changed to FS. And this was the Army transportation car, and the Coast Guard was training the officers and the men how to handle the ship. Unfortunately, I think all of them ended in the infantry, and the Coast Guard ended up with about a hundred of these FS. They were used later in the war to go between the small islands in the Pacific theater because their graph was small. They were about a hundred and, say a hundred and eighty feet in length. I left that ship and then I went to the Juniper. They disbanded that

when the Coast Guard was going to take over, and then they, I guess I was on the first ship that was steel construction. The others, they had wooden ships before that in the Army. Then I went to a buoy-tender called the Juniper that worked out of Key West. And then I got transferred to Camp Bradford, Virginia for an LST for the, which probably would have been in the invasion of Japan, but then while I was there they dropped the bomb and, of course, that was scrubbed. I then was transferred to the third naval district, supposedly for the weather patrol, or iceberg patrol, and I was within three points of a discharge and yelled and they sent me to Ellis Island and they put me on another buoy tender out on Staten Island called the Tulip, which was really old. (he laughs) And then I come back here and, again, and then was transferred to Philadelphia and discharged.

The last two times I was here was just a matter of one night one time, and I don't even know whose sack I slept in. Somebody was on leave, I guess. So it was just for an in-and-out, a very short period of time, and no time to observe what was going on, or know what was going on. But it is listed on my discharge those three times I was on Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Oh, gentlemen, I think that kind of brings us full circle here. I want to thank you both for coming from Pennsylvania, for helping us gather some information about a

time period we don't have a lot of information about, really, and that's the Coast Guard tenure here at Ellis Island. So I thank you both.

ILES: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, and on behalf of Brian Feeney signing off for the National Park Service.