

EI-088

KATHLEEN MARY DYER HAMM

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NURSE AT ELLIS ISLAND, 1943-1944

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, September 11, 1991. We're here at Ellis Island with Kathleen Hamm, who was a registered nurse at Ellis Island in 1943 and 1944. Brian Feeney and I will both be conducting the interview with Mrs. Hamm. Janet Levine is running the equipment. Good morning.

HAMM: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Hamm, could you please give me your full name, include your maiden name in that, and your date of birth, please.

HAMM: Right. Kathleen Mary Dyer Hamm.

SIGRIST: Dyer is spelled . . .

HAMM: Dyer. D-Y-E-R.

SIGRIST: And your date of birth, please?

HAMM: My date of birth, January the 13th, 1920.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

HAMM: Albany, Vermont.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about how you got interested in nursing?

HAMM: Well, I always said I would like to be a nurse, even when I was in high school. And from then I knew what I wanted to do, and did go to Burlington, Vermont, at the Bishop Degriagsbrand Hospital. And . . .

SIGRIST: I'm sorry, what . . .

HAMM: Bishop Degriagsbrand.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

HAMM: Oh, yes. Capital D-E-G-R-I-A-G-S-B-R-A-N-D. Degriagsbrand. And that was in Burlington, Vermont. And we were also associated with the University of Vermont, right on the campus. We were on the, funding the campus. And we also had studies there, too.

SIGRIST: I see. As sort of a little introduction to what we're going to talk about, why don't you tell us how you ended up here at Ellis Island.

HAMM: Well, I wanted to get into the Service anyway. Because in '91 the war, when we, in September we, I graduated in September 1941 and the war started in December of 19, uh, 1941, right. And so I wanted always to do it, but we did go, I did

go down to Troy, New York to do private duty, and also worked in the hospitals. But I, when the war broke out everybody was all hopped to get moving and go and be of some help. But my mother was sixty-five and she was quite ill at the time with high blood pressure and a few other things. There were illnesses. So they said you hadn't better go. You'd better go down with my cousin down to Worcester, Mass and do some work in the hospital down there, which is a very accredited hospital. And so I said, well, I guess I would. So we did that for about a year. And then we, my other friend and I said, "We think we will get down to Boston and see what they've got in the Public Health Service," because a doctor told me, "I don't really want you to go overseas since your mother is in a very, well, might have a bad stroke at one time or another." And he said, "You will not be able to ever come back. You're over there to stay." So he said, "If you go to Public Health, you could get a leave or some such thing. It's run by the Coast Guard. And he said, "You could get it to come home." And I said, "Well, I want to go anyway." So he said, "Well, we'll get the orders and we'll get the papers necessary." So we did that and my girlfriend, she went to another hospital, she went to Boston and stayed there because that's where she lived, but I had been, I was taken and they were sending me several places where I could go, but at the end they said, "Please report to Ellis Island where we need the most, the nurses the most." So that's when I went, in September, on the 25th, 1943.

FEENEY: This was actually the Public Health Service that you joined, then?

HAMM: Yes, uh-huh.

FEENEY: And what were the other sites they offered you besides Ellis Island?

HAMM: Oh, they offered me, oh, one out in, you know, I guess it was Seattle, and one in New Orleans. But I didn't really want to go that far.

FEENEY: And was it the type of thing where you were joining for a period of time, or it was an open-ended . . .

HAMM: Open-ended, yes. Yes, it was.

SIGRIST: Did you have to interview at Ellis Island?

HAMM: Uh, we interviewed in Boston. You know, the people who were there, they were hiring the people and knowing, I guess that must have been one of their places, you know, one of their top places where they would get the information for the nurses and they had better reasons for that because they had more nurses in Boston that they could review, that they could inquire about more than anyone else.

FEENEY: So had you done nursing work at another hospital previous to joining the Public Health Service?

HAMM: Oh, yes. I did.

FEENEY: For how long?

HAMM: Oh, for, let me see, from the time I graduated in September of '91 to, up to forty, up to '42 or '43, because it took some time for the papers to get through.

SIGRIST: When you were interviewing in Boston, was it a representative from Ellis

Island or was it just a general public . . .

HAMM: General. Yes, and there wasn't too much asked. They were sending in a lot of papers to the Public Health Service, and that was the Boston area. Then there was a western area, too, that they had.

SIGRIST: What did you know of Ellis Island? I mean, what did that mean to you?

HAMM: Well, I just read a lot about it and I had never seen it, you know. I had, but there was much of a thing that we thought, I thought it would just like it.

SIGRIST: Was it exciting for a girl from Vermont, the idea of going to New York City?

HAMM: It certainly was. Oh, yeah, when I, well, of course, I had been down to Worcester, Mass, so it wasn't that bad that I just, I didn't come out of the sticks, more or less, where you just don't ever see anything bigger than a six hundred population or something of that sort. But it was quite exciting to come down on the train, and then I had to get off the train and come at Penn Station and then come down on the ferry. But then they met me over at the ferry, you know, and I told you this is at 3:45 I was to be there, and, uh, and board their ferry and come over here.

FEENEY: Was it the ferry to Ellis Island that you took?

HAMM: Yes.

FEENEY: Do you remember that boat?

HAMM: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the boat for us?

HAMM: Oh, well, it was a, sort of more of a vessel. It was not like the other big, big boats. It wasn't a big one. And it sort of came out like a big, like a great, and then it was very, like, old-fashioned looking. It wasn't, didn't look like the others that went like the Staten Island ferry. It was not of their type at all. But it was very, it was all right. It never bothered anyone. It never seemed to break down, but you had to be, the boat did not run after one a.m. in the morning, so we must be at the, there, or they would not wait. They did not wait for anyone. If you weren't there, you rode the Staten Island ferry all night, or you just went some place and would have to stay.

FEENEY: So the boat tied up here at Ellis Island for the night, then?

HAMM: Yes. After one o'clock from the city, then they came in. It didn't take only about a very short time to get over here. Not that much.

SIGRIST: Who rode on the boat? Who rode on the Ellis Island ferry?

HAMM: Oh, everybody. All the employees came back and forth and the coast guard and the people that were, you know, that were, some of these people would get leaves, the patients, and they would come back and forth, or they would get a day off. We would take the patients somewhere, different places that they could go in the city . . .

SIGRIST: I see.

HAMM: Or outside.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me that first day here at Ellis Island? What you had to do and what you were feeling?

HAMM: Oh, well, I know because I was alone. You know, but it didn't really bother me too much because everybody was very nice, and it wasn't crowded crowded, you know, like some places are. And it was really nice. And they were telling me where to go, and they were, "Please come to the . . ." Well, mostly I had to deal with the nurse administrators and things. I didn't have, and we, I remember walking through the big room coming into the, where the, I guess the immigrants must have come, because they had two or three big wheelchairs there to let us know that it must have been where they were when I don't know when they closed the immigration area, but it wasn't certainly there in '43, but it was nicely, it was very empty, but they had kept it up well in appearance. And then I had to go to the nursing department over in the hospital, so I never knew much about these rooms, just the nursing part itself in there. Because we had our meals there, and we also had, we could use the cafeteria when the patients, after the patients, and the ones that could go could go, too, to the cafeteria.

SIGRIST: Where was the cafeteria?

HAMM: The cafeteria was in the hospital itself downstairs and we could go there, or we could go over to, sometimes they had little areas where you could get a hot dog, or the usual lunch.

FEENEY: So what sort of introduction did they give you to Ellis Island on that first day or two?

HAMM: Oh, they told me, when I was coming, they knew I was coming and they, one of the two nurses met me at the boat as it came in. And . . .

FEENEY: Did they walk you through the whole complex?

HAMM: Oh, yes. They told me all about it, and how it would be. And the next day, you know, they took me to all the places, and you sort of got a very good introduction of what you would have to do.

FEENEY: Did it seem like there was a lot of activity going on at that point?

HAMM: Not as much as you could see today. You know, when I got over to Public Health, because that's much bigger, but it was very nicely organized and they did a very good job, I thought, of taking care of the patients.

FEENEY: When you came into the main building here, which was the former immigrant processing point, it was your impression that there was, you know, nothing going on in the way of immigration processing at that time, but what was happening here? I mean, this is such a huge building?

HAMM: Yes, I know. Well, they had many people that were doing a lot of work at, like, you know, business people. You know, they were doing, I guess, the work for Ellis Island itself, because they needed many people for the Coast Guard coming, and also

the Merchant Marine were here, too. And, uh, they had many of the organizations would come, many people, and they would try to entertain. There was much entertaining going on for the patients that were there and also some of the Coast Guard that went on. You know, they just had something happen to their leg or they weren't too bad they would have a little film area where they could go and see the movies.

FEENEY: And that was over here in the main building?

HAMM: Uh-huh. And some of it, most of it was in hospital, though. Not much was ever done here that I could notice, because we just went and go the boat and things like that. But we didn't come into this area very much except to get the boat.

SIGRIST: Was it that you were restricted from this area, or you really just had no reason to come?

HAMM: No, that's the reason. No, we had no reason to come. We had, you know, enough to do over there, really.

SIGRIST: Were you issued a uniform the first day that you were here?

HAMM: No, we had our own, but they told us what they wanted us to wear, with the picture I have here.

SIGRIST: Describe what the uniform was like.

HAMM: Oh, yes, it's plain white and they had, always you had to have a little on the sleeves, and you always had to wear your cap with the black band notifying you are

a registered nurse, with the black band.

FEENEY: You mean, if you were a practical nurse you couldn't . . .

HAMM: You couldn't wear, yes, you couldn't wear the black, you know. But they must have their caps on, which today they don't wear.

SIGRIST: What about the doctors? What kind of a uniform did the doctors . . .

HAMM: Well, they wore. Most of them were, you know, military and the usual things. And they, of course, really did come and go quite a bit, you know. They would be up here, and then they wouldn't be, like, regular all the time. I think if there was one or two generals or, uh, I mean, surgeons and sometimes the medical doctors, but usually they had them more or less on a come and go basis.

SIGRIST: So there was a large turnover of staff.

HAMM: Yes.

SIGRIST: Among the nurses also, or mostly with the doctors?

HAMM: No. The nurses, most of the nurses stayed here. And it's terrible I can't know, I used to keep track of them, but that's a long time to keep track of them, but I couldn't. (she laughs)

FEENEY: You said the doctors were in uniform. Now, were there Public Health Service doctors and therefore wearing the uniform of the Public Health Service, or were

they military physicians from other branches of the service?

HAMM: Some of them were military and some of them were Public Health.

FEENEY: And there was a large rotation.

HAMM: Yes.

FEENEY: Mostly of the military physicians, or the Public Health Service doctors?

HAMM: Uh, the Public Health Service doctors, I would say.

FEENEY: How many doctors would you say were on staff at that time?

HAMM: Oh, there were quite a few, as I remember, but I don't remember them nearly as well as I do the ones in Public Health Service Hospital, Stapleton, because that was so big, they had special orthopedic doctors and special surgery and medicine, and big orthopedic, tremendous orthopedic, which I knew the doctors and knew their names well.

SIGRIST: Why do you suppose that is? Why do you suppose there was such a large staff of orthopedic doctors?

HAMM: Oh, over there, well, over there at Stapleton they needed them because we used to have the big, sometimes some of them would have a broken neck or they had a lot of, they had a lot of orthopedic work to do there, they really did.

FEENEY: Excuse me, you used the name Stapleton. You said, "Over in Stapleton."

HAMM: Yes.

FEENEY: What was Stapleton?

HAMM: Stapleton, Staten Island, is where the Public Health Service Hospital is that I went to after I had, after I left here.

FEENEY: I see.

SIGRIST: I was sort of curious as to the age, the sort of general age of the nurses and doctors. Was this basically a young staff, or were there a lot of veteran nurses here?

HAMM: Well, there was, I would say they were mostly in the thirty age, the thirty age group, I would say.

SIGRIST: Fairly young.

HAMM: Fairly young, yes, they were. And, of course, the older supervisors had been here, you know, some time. They were, they were, of course, older. And, but I don't, and not many of them left because I had to leave because my mother was ill, but I left in, when I came, I thought, well, I'll see them when I come back, but that was only from September 25th when I came here. And then I went home. I had to go home in July because she had the stroke and was very, very seriously ill. So I got a leave and went back to, and went to the Stapleton Hospital in September again of 19, but it was

19, uh, '44.

FEENEY: Here on Ellis Island, of course, the medical section was the whole area on the southern side of the ferry slip there. You know, you were working in the hospitals which are right on the ferry slip. Now, what about the buildings on the far south side of the island which during the immigration period were the contagious disease wards? Was that area included in the portion that the Public Health Service worked in?

HAMM: No. We had the one, at least I remember, I only worked in the one big hospital. Big, it isn't as big, but I mean only the hospital, because that's where they wanted us, you know, for the patients that, you know, we did some of them. It might have been that they were, like, Coast Guard or something like that had maybe had a broken leg and they couldn't go back to work. Maybe they put them there, but I am not sure. I'll have to be truthful with you. I only did the nursing work. Our rooms were there and the meal was there, so I didn't, and then we go through the ferry. And that's, I didn't really go around.

FEENEY: What was going on on the other end of the island there in that medical area? That was not part of the area that you served?

HAMM: I couldn't, I couldn't really tell you that. I really couldn't.

SIGRIST: You just never went.

HAMM: Yes, I never went over because that was the area to, you know, that was more or less of our area to keep and to stay at, so we did.

SIGRIST: Did you, were your living quarters in the hospital building?

HAMM: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe a little bit of that to me? Where in the building was it?

HAMM: Well, I mean, it was off the building more or less. It was, you could go through the little tunnel, things like that. But you weren't really with the patients or anything like that, but it was one of the buildings that you could go under, like, the, go through to the other, and that was your building that you had.

SIGRIST: What was the staff housing like?

HAMM: Oh, it was all right. It was all right, I mean, as far as, it was the usual thing that you would have. I would have it even at the Memorial Hospital in Worcester. You have like your room and your, maybe a bathroom between the two of you, and it would have, that's about, and then you have the dining area where you could come out and get your soda, or something like that. So it was about the same.

SIGRIST: Was it all furnished for you?

HAMM: Yes, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Did you have a roommate?

HAMM: No, it was all separate.

FEENEY: You mentioned that in the hospital the eating area was downstairs, which I assume you mean it was on the first floor or maybe even in the basement. What about on the second floor? There is an old eating area that we found up there, and I was wondering what that area was used for? It looks like it might be a cafeteria.

HAMM: Well, maybe they had it for the people, you know, when they, the patients went, or somebody come over here to entertain them they could have something like that there. You see, they would have to have quite a big place, say, some of the, like Sylvia Fine, the wife of Ed Sullivan, she would have quite a bit of equipment coming here. She was very, very instrumental in doing everything she could for the coast guards or anyone who couldn't get out. She was great on that. They wanted to be sure that they saw as much as they could. And she had the orchestras come over here and comics and all of that stuff. And, of course, with her husband she had the right connections, you know, for getting what she, you know, being able to do this.

FEENEY: Did they have performances like that in the recreation building there, which was a little bit separate.

HAMM: Well, probably it all depended on how big the, how many would be able to go, and whether they had to go in wheelchairs or whether they had to go, you know, on a stretcher. Because some of them, you know, or something, it would all depend on the size.

FEENEY: Do you remember attending performances in the recreation hall, or seeing movies in there?

HAMM: Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Anyone famous? Any famous people coming out to entertain?

HAMM: Uh, oh, yes. It was a few people that was coming out to entertain that I remember. It was some of the comics that Ed Sullivan would have, they would come, and some of the singers. And it was kind of, it was really nice. There was so many I really can't remember.

SIGRIST: You mentioned a famous patient.

HAMM: Oh, yes, a patient. Now, we had, (she laughs) we had Caesar Romero here and, of course, I know that's what happened.

FEENEY: What was Caesar Romero doing here?

HAMM: He was in the Coast Guard.

SIGRIST: And how did he hurt himself?

HAMM: Well, I don't, I know that he was either there was an incident or an accident on the ship so, of course, you know, they, I must have caught him right here. I don't know. And then he had, he wasn't injured then, but he had a very bad cold, and I don't know whether it was the cold that they, whether they got into the water, or what it was. We didn't get anything of detail, but he wasn't here very long, you know, but everybody was waiting to take his temperature and all this other stuff, you know.

SIGRIST: Of course. Fighting each other, probably.

FEENEY: So you knew who he was, and . . .

HAMM: Oh, yes. I did.

FEENEY: The staff was quite excited about him being here. How long would you say he was here?

HAMM: Oh, I wouldn't say he was here over maybe a week probably, five days or something like that. I think it was . . .

FEENEY: He didn't, by any chance, entertain or anything when he got better, did he?

HAMM: No, not to my knowledge. Because, you see, I was off some of the time, you know.

FEENEY: Did you get to speak with him while he was here?

HAMM: Oh, yes, but it was very, "How are you feeling?" or something. It was like, you have to treat them like you would any other patients, you see.

FEENEY: So he wasn't treated any different then, was he?

HAMM: Well, I wouldn't say so. Not in any, you know, unless they were so anxious to come in and see him or something like that, you see?

FEENEY: Other than asking him twelve times a day if he wanted something to drink.

(they laugh)

SIGRIST: You know, you talk about being off, and I'm curious, what were your work hours? What was the length of a shift, and what kind of a . . .

HAMM: Oh, we always worked like seven to three, or three thirty. You had to have the half hour for your lunch. Or you'd be working like three to seven, uh, three to eleven, and eleven to seven. That was three shifts.

SIGRIST: And what kind of time off did you get?

HAMM: Oh, we got at least two weeks, you would get. You would get so much for every one of your days that you would work. Then you would be also sick days you could have, you would have a certain amount of those. Of course I only was here, let me see. January, September, October, November, December, say, ten months, you see, and I don't really get to know what it was, but I didn't, I just left for home so I didn't have to, I didn't have a vacation in between that.

SIGRIST: Did you get five shifts and then two days off, something like that?

HAMM: Yes, they'd do that, uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: And did the shifts rotate, or were you always working . . .

HAMM: Some rotate, and some people liked to work the nights and some people liked to work the afternoons. So if they really wanted to do that all the time they could do that. I just rotated myself when I was.

SIGRIST: And the doctors were working on basically the same kinds of stuff.

HAMM: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about the doctors, maybe one that you happen to remember?

HAMM: Isn't it strange, I knew them, you know, quite well, but I can't remember them like I remember the hospital over there and the Public Health over there. Like, they were, DeShennet was Head of Orthopedics over there and stuff like that. And I can't, I don't think they had a head from orthopedics or a head doctor on, you know, surgery or for medicine. I really can't name him. I think the name was something like Hackett. That was one of them, but I'm not so sure, you know.

SIGRIST: Was it a friendly atmosphere between the nurses and doctors, or . . .

HAMM: Yes. It was. It was very friendly, it was very good, but it was very strict. It wasn't look like they go in the hospital saying, "Hi, how are you, Rachel?" You never called each other by their first name, never.

FEENEY: You mean the other doctors and nurses?

HAMM: The nurses, the doctors, anyone. They had to come in and say, "Doctor so-and-so." They don't say, come in and say, like they do today, "Hello, Dr. Willie," or something like that. This was not allowed.

SIGRIST: Did they fraternize after hours?

HAMM: Yes, they could, yes. They did.

SIGRIST: Were there any nurses and doctors who were married?

HAMM: No. No, there wasn't.

FEENEY: Do you remember the head nurse here at Ellis Island?

HAMM: No. I don't remember that there. I think it was Bedell, but I'm not sure. Because I knew all my head. Isn't that terrible? From the other place I did, I think. But I hate to say this, because I'm not so sure, really. Isn't that terrible to be here? I don't know. I couldn't remember.

SIGRIST: Well, it was a long time ago. (he laughs)

HAMM: But I remember it over there so well. I don't know why, but I guess it was . . .

FEENEY: Maybe it was someone you didn't have much contact with?

HAMM: No. Well, no, we don't have much contact with the doctors because like they did now, they would come in and see the patients and they would also, you know, put their orders down. And then they had other things to do. They were not, they were not, well, they were friendly, but I mean it was really a business friendship, you know. I mean, that was their job.

SIGRIST: But never condescending or patronizing?

HAMM: No.

FEENEY: As formal as it all was, did Ellis Island feel like a military installation because it was wartime?

HAMM: No. Well, it did to some, well, of course when you see the Coast Guard come in with their uniforms on, and then, of course, they had a very strict once-a-week, you know, business that you had to, well, of course you cleaned your place all the time, but it was exceptional on Friday. They really examined everything. The top of the doors . . .

SIGRIST: Who is "they?"

HAMM: "They" is the Public Health Service operators, you know, the people that were here. And it wouldn't be the doctors or anyone. It would be the Public Health Service, and they were the two-or-three stripers. And they would come, and everything had to be in order, which I really liked, because it wasn't hard to work, you know, as well as it is now. To get anything clean today is a hard job, but it wasn't then because, and if anything wasn't done right somebody would have to come back and they would have to repeat their work.

FEENEY: What about security on the island? Was that very tight?

HAMM: Well, it wasn't as tight as it was in the other Public Health Service. It didn't

have to be, because I guess they felt that after one o'clock or so they're isolated. Of course, we had two or three guards in the night or so in the hospital, you see. Or we would have that things. They would be there. But not, but no one ever bothered us, really.

SIGRIST: And what were they guarding against? Why would there be guards in the hospital?

HAMM: Well, they would wanted to be sure that none of the patients got up and wandered around or something like that while the nurse was out somewhere else. Or whether they would get up and be walking around and we could walk out or something, and they would have something like that.

FEENEY: Who were the guards?

HAMM: I couldn't tell you what their names were.

FEENEY: No, no. But I mean what were . . .

HAMM: Well, I mean, they were Public Health Service, probably.

FEENEY: It was all Public Health Service.

HAMM: I imagine it was.

FEENEY: So it was kind of self-contained, then. I mean, everything that went on was Public Health Service. It's not like the Coast Guard supplied guards for you or

support personnel or something.

HAMM: No. I think the Public Health Service really, and some of the Coast Guard were, though. When they did the examining of all the rooms and everything else, that was Coast Guard.

FEENEY: Did you ever perform any medical examinations for the Coast Guard?

HAMM: No. The doctors always did the medical examinations.

FEENEY: What doctors?

HAMM: Well, the doctor, if you were, mostly it was medicine, and also medical doctors.

FEENEY: I guess what I meant was, did the Public Health Service perform medical examinations or any sort of medical support services for the Coast Guard?

HAMM: Um, well, I don't, no, I don't know, because that would be their, the doctor would be talking to them, you know, as to what they wanted, and then the supervisor would see if they wanted, you mean like leaves that they could go out, or what they would do, or what they could do?

FEENEY: No, but, you know, the Coast Guard was here during the Second World War, and they maintained training facilities here for the Coast Guard men. And I was just wondering if the Coast Guard people who were over here in the main building, the medical services, if those were provided by the Public Health Service or whether the

Coast Guard had its own medical facilities?

HAMM: Well, I know the Coast Guard, if they stayed on the ship I guess they had their own men on the ships that would give them their medicine and things like that. They didn't have to come into the hospital. But if they should have to come into the hospital, they would be taken care of, once you get in there and admitted, you would be taking care of the medical staff. But on the ship, if they weren't too ill, if they had a cold and they had something like that, they would . . .

SIGRIST: I guess what you're saying, that you really had very little interaction with the Coast Guard.

HAMM: No, well, unless they were ill I didn't have any interaction, except for their, as I said, their examinations. But the patients . . .

SIGRIST: So they were brought into the hospital if they happened to be sick.

HAMM: Oh, yes, yes. That's right.

SIGRIST: Were you ever privy to the Coast Guard doing drills or any kind of thing like that out on the grounds?

HAMM: No, no. I didn't see it because the only ones we saw were ill, you know, really. They were, you know, just recuperating from whatever it was, and then they went back to their ship. And probably the, because they have, on the ship they have two or three people that do, not nursing work, but they are taking care of them for

medicine, whatever it is.

SIGRIST: At the entertainment events, were the Coast Guard invited to these also?

HAMM: Oh, yes, everybody. I mean, everybody that was here, the Coast Guard, and everything like that. And then she would also have us go over on the ferry and she would have vans and we would go to the, like, Belmont Racetrack. I remember going there with the patients, and even the ones that were in the stretchers, she saw that they got right up front. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: You're talking about Sylvia Fine?

HAMM: Yes. And then we also had, then when we would go to the circus at Madison Square Garden, she had people coming and staying with them. And it was really great, it was really to see.

SIGRIST: So she was really, she was really the power behind . . .

HAMM: Oh, yes, she certainly was.

SIGRIST: . . . the entertainment for the people.

HAMM: Yes, uh-huh. Very well. And she didn't, also in Stapleton, too, she was really great to take care of the, she took care of the women that used to be in the hospitals and walk around and she was the head of that for, you know, for what they would like, or if they wanted to write home or this kind of thing that they could do. The Ladies Auxiliary, she had it called.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: I want to ask you, what sorts of cases were you dealing with in the hospital? Just give me some sort of typical injuries that you were coping with?

HAMM: Oh, you would have, like, many, most of them were quite a few that would, we'd be on orthopedic, but they weren't like an orthopedic in itself. They didn't have, like, the big wards where just orthopedics was taken care of, but they would also have them away from where anybody, like, had pneumonia or, which they didn't have much of, really. And then they would have colds, and then they would have an appendix, surgery operation, they would be in a place. And anyone who had, that was anything to do with maybe, anything that was really, that might be not in the place where surgery would, surgery must be in a cleaner area and you have to put the others out. Any contagious thing was put to one, put to another area, and we had to use the smocks and everything else because they didn't want anything to, you know, get involved in the hospital here.

FEENEY: Were you a surgical nurse, also?

HAMM: Yes, we were both. We were both surgical and medical. But I didn't do, work in the operating room.

FEENEY: You didn't.

HAMM: No.

FEENEY: Do you remember how many operating rooms you had?

HAMM: Hmm. Oh, isn't that terrible? I know I can remember that. I know. And, of course, if anything was big it was sent to the big Public Health Service hospital anyway.

SIGRIST: What do you mean by "big?"

HAMM: Well, big, I mean, say if anybody had a, you know, a complete severage of the neck and they had a quadruple they were, you know, paralyzed, they would. Or if it was a big head injury or something like that it was not taken care of here. You know, they would phone over, I guess, and they would be sent there.

SIGRIST: So you're basically dealing with secondary injuries and contagious diseases of some sort.

HAMM: Yes. Or something, yes, or something, yes, or operations they would do. I don't know if they even did this at the end, I'm not sure of that, what they did in that months. But when I was here I remembered it had to be not the big, it had to be where they would, you know, be more capable of getting help in, see, and Stapleton had the place.

FEENEY: So for the most part who were the patients being brought in?

HAMM: Oh, the patients would be Coast Guard and Merchant Seamen. They

would get some, maybe injuries on their boat, and the, and they would also have maybe diarr, they have intestinal problems and they have, you know, maybe chest problems. Things like that, they would have that.

FEENEY: Mostly people that would be operating within the New York area, or were people sent back to New York from other places?

HAMM: No, they were all over, in the Coast Guard then. See, the war was on, and they were back and forth, you know, over the area, you know, that they could get.

SIGRIST: Were you receiving people from Europe?

HAMM: Well, I guess, in the Coast Guard. I don't know if they had gone to Europe. I don't know whether they had the, whether they, where they did go. I mean, it was, you know, stuff like that. But it was not as busy as the Public, as the other Public Health hospitals because it wasn't that big, you know, to be able to handle the big cases.

FEENEY: Was it a steady stream of people, though? Were you always busy?

HAMM: We were always busy, yes. It was a busy time in 1943.

SIGRIST: Mostly young men?

HAMM: Hmm, yes, mostly. Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me just on an average day, make a gross

generalization here. You're on an average day, just what were some of the things you had to do during that day, some of your duties?

HAMM: Well, the first thing you do when you come in is you must count the drugs. That's the big thing. And then, of course, drugs were not anything like it is today, you know, so it was not a big deal, but it is today. That's the first thing you do is check before you . . .

SIGRIST: What do you mean count the drugs?

HAMM: Count the drugs, because if you're coming in on the next shift, you have to check it with them because sometimes people know how to get the drugs and stuff. You must have it in order. You must have it, if it's supposed to be forty by the time you end, and you used two, it's got to be thirty-eight or there will be a problem. And so they do that immediately. And then you go around to see the patients that you are going to have in your area. It could be . . .

SIGRIST: How many?

HAMM: Oh, you'd probably, there we had fifteen or sixteen, you know, in my area.

SIGRIST: Per nurse?

HAMM: . . . or someplace. And maybe somebody else would be more, have more. It all depends on the illness of the patient, or ill patients were in an area where they would have more chance to see the nurses and see the other places. And also the

medicines are a big thing, too. You would have to be sure of the medicines and whoever, you would be giving all the medicines and all the syringe injections and all that, in all the, if they were having problems with their stomach you would also have to do, you would also have to call the doctor or call the other assistant or what it was, and they would have to have i.v.'s and things like that. That's the things we were doing.

SIGRIST: Did you have to take each patient's temperature?

HAMM: Oh, yes. That's a real thing that you have to do that, and twice on your shift. And then if it's higher you have to do that, and then you have to take the blood pressure, too.

SIGRIST: Were you also responsible for feeding the patients?

HAMM: Yes. We were, if their hands couldn't, we had to do that, too. Uh-huh.

FEENEY: Were there ever any emergencies that you remember where a huge number of people would suddenly be sent here to Ellis Island and maybe you got overwhelmed?

HAMM: You wouldn't have a huge, because it would be over at the other, they'd have to bring them to the big Public Health. That's a big hospital in Public Health.

FEENEY: That's Stapleton?

HAMM: Yes, it is. It's a big one. And, of course, they did have a big ship collapse there and they did, some of the doctors got really gold awards, I guess, for what they

did, because half the patients, some of the patients were burned from here up (she gestures) and some of them had freezing feet. It was in March when the ships collided and stuff, so they had a big time. They had to call everybody in. That was really, that was really a big affair and it was really a lot of work. I didn't see it at that time, but when I was in the next day it was a lot to do. At that time you really were moving.

SIGRIST: And you never had to deal with any kind of an emergency like that here. It was very different . . .

HAMM: No. Not unless you would have somebody have a heart attack, you know, or something like that. But they would always be doctors, you know, to call, or doctors in the hospital where you could get, you know, somebody quite rapidly in time so that you would not feel that you, they didn't have, you know, a chance when they could have had, and they should have had, but that wasn't their ideal. There was always somebody that was here.

SIGRIST: How many nurses' stations per floor?

HAMM: I think that one we had was I think it was the, of course the supervisor had hers, and the other one had another one, so I think we had two, like, on the end, and they were in the middle, and they were big.

SIGRIST: Can you just sort of describe for us the nurses' station?

HAMM: Well, the nurses' stations was twice, I guess, about as big as this, I would say. Of course, we had all the medicines and all the other things in there at this time.

And it was about like, yes, I would say . . . And then of course they had the two offices, too, so I would say about this.

SIGRIST: Would there be a telephone there? Would there be a time card, or . . .

HAMM: Yes. Oh, that would be with the secretaries across the way. The secretaries would have that.

SIGRIST: The secretaries for the doctors?

HAMM: Oh, no. For the hospital, whatever it was. The phone calls, and things like that. And they would call, the supervisor wanted, they always called the secretary first, and then where the people were, and she had that. And, of course, she would have them, the Coast Guard sometimes, they would come around and inspect the place at different times. And the Merchant Seamen, there was quite a few Merchant Seamen there, too.

FEENEY: Because it was war time, did you ever experiences any shortages in supplies or personnel?

HAMM: No, I wouldn't say that we did. They were, well, I thought that the supplies were adequate, you know. Of course, today you can't even think of today and what they had, what they worked with then. It was not, you know, they have to have many more things or, you know, that comes out. There's so many new medicines, there's so many new supplies, there's so many new, of everything, you know, that you can't even realize that you . . . Of course, they had to have the supplies enough so it was sufficient for all

the patients, but not as many as they have now in the line of goods. The medicines are just the same, and the other things, but not all of the things like the bandages. Of course, we had to have a big bandage things. They would have, somebody maybe got cut in a big cut, and they would have to have all this. And they would have to have the irrigation and all this other stuff. But we didn't have, you know, the real big surgery or big things, but they would, if they were injured in the arm or the leg or . . .

SIGRIST: What about shortages in food? Were there certain foods that you were never served because it was wartime?

HAMM: Oh, no. They were . . .

SIGRIST: Was the food good?

HAMM: Yes, it was. Uh-huh.

FEENEY: So rationing didn't affect you then. (he laughs)

HAMM: Pardon?

FEENEY: Rationing didn't affect you folks out here . . .

HAMM: No, it didn't. No, it certainly didn't. And it's better than the stuff they put on microwave today because . . . (she laughs) It was better than it is today.

SIGRIST: I want to ask you about, you've talked about the Merchant Seamen and the Coast Guard. What other organizations and agencies are out here on the island?

For instance, were there religious agencies that were distributing . . .

HAMM: Sometimes on Sunday they would have them come.

SIGRIST: Did they have church services?

HAMM: Yes, they had church services here.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about that?

HAMM: Well, it wasn't, there wasn't too many that went. I think that they could go if they wanted to, but they were, you know, it was not too religious.

SIGRIST: Was it a sort of non-denominational service?

HAMM: Yes. It was something like that, yes. And they would come and go, and then you could, uh, go if you wanted to and then they would have the priest come if somebody wanted to have their, if they wanted to see the priest, he was available for them.

SIGRIST: Were there Jewish agencies out here to tend to for the Jewish patients?

HAMM: Yes, if there needed to be. If they needed, they could call them and get them over to see. Because they wouldn't be near their home or anything like that, but they would call them in.

FEENEY: Were there any other outside organizations that might have helped with rehabilitation therapy or anything like that?

HAMM: No, I don't think they would because there was dancers that used to come, or something like that, but they didn't really, you know, if they were well enough, I guess, to go back for therapy, you know, and things like that, they probably would get that on the ship. I don't know. But I didn't see that many in therapy.

SIGRIST: You said dancers would come. You mean to . . .

HAMM: Well, I mean dancers, I mean, would come and they would say, you know, "We want to get up and dance like this." They would, you know, be kidding at times with them, you know.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see.

HAMM: But that's what I meant by that. They were trying to make them . . .

FEENEY: Would even, you know, to keep patients occupied who were going to be here for a couple of months for treatment or something like that.

HAMM: Oh, they had entertainment quite a few times over here. And then they would also take them out. She would see that several, at least once a week. I think Sylvia Fine would see that they would be brought out someplace.

SIGRIST: And how many staff members had to be in attendance when they, when patients were taken off the island?

HAMM: Well, we had one or two nurses because we had to give the medicine and

we had to give the other things that were needed, and then also we'd have four or five attendants, you know, that would be there.

SIGRIST: Male attendants?

HAMM: Male attendants.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of male orderlies or male nurses here at that time?

HAMM: Uh, no. Not many male nurses, but there was male attendants that they had, and women, too. Like they would have people that would do, of course, the washing and getting the things cleaned and getting the rooms cleaned. They would have all that supply. They had enough to keep clean.

SIGRIST: Did you also have volunteers that volunteered in the hospital over here?

HAMM: Yes, they would come. They would come over and be here. But you couldn't really, they were volunteer. You couldn't always depend . . .

SIGRIST: What were they allowed to do?

HAMM: Well, they could go. They would have to get the patients water and they would have to get the, maybe they would bring them in a paper or maybe some of the people that, you know, couldn't see too well or they couldn't read or didn't want to, they would read to them and that's about it that they would do, you know, if they could be volunteers.

SIGRIST: Were these private citizens or were they people supplied by various agencies to volunteer?

HAMM: No. I remember the agency wasn't that big. They did it sometimes in the summer, like if the kids, the children, are not children, I mean, they say they're high school age, would come sometimes, I know, as a volunteer.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

HAMM: But I don't, I think maybe some of them, they didn't stay long or anything, as I remember. See, I can't remember, the seven days period I can't remember now. And then when I went off duty I didn't really see what, if it was on a Sunday I wouldn't see whether they had come or not, but I know that they did get some attention in that category.

FEENEY: Did you ever visit the Statue of Liberty while you were working here at Ellis?

HAMM: Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

FEENEY: Did you ever take patients over there?

HAMM: I never took one over there. I don't know myself. Maybe they did.

SIGRIST: Why did you go?

HAMM: Well, I wanted to see it. I enjoyed it.

FEENEY: How did you get there?

HAMM: Oh, God, I guess we went over on boat, naturally.

FEENEY: From Ellis Island, or did you have to go to New York and get a special boat?

HAMM: Oh, yes, yes. We didn't have anything to do with going over there. They didn't have the special boats like now. Like I was so surprised when I took some people from Phoenix, Arizona over to the, over to see Staten Island. And I thought, they had two different boats. But now for six dollars, you see, you get the both, you do what you want to. And it wasn't that way when I went before.

FEENEY: Do you remember if during the war, during that time if the public could visit the Statue of Liberty, or was it closed because of the war?

HAMM: Uh, no. I think at that time it was rather limited, you know, to see it and things, but I think that as far as I know I went there. I went there while I was here.

FEENEY: What did you do when you were there?

HAMM: Oh, it's a, at the Statue?

FEENEY: To the Statue of Liberty?

HAMM: Oh, well, naturally we walked up the stairs. (she laughs) And to see it, went around, and could see what we wanted to see and stuff like that.

SIGRIST: Was there a restaurant on the island?

HAMM: No. Just like a cafeteria, like. Not much. It really wasn't much at that time. And, of course, it was different. And I don't know, maybe they did dim the lights or something. Maybe they did keep that down. I don't know, but I don't know how I got there, I went there once while I was, so. Maybe you had to go just in the daytime, and I guess they didn't want the lights. The lights were kept pretty slim.

FEENEY: So lights were off at night?

HAMM: Well, quite a bit, yes, because they didn't want too much light over here, you know, or anyplace.

FEENEY: Do you remember if the torch was lit at night during the war, or maybe it was turned off?

HAMM: I can't, but I don't think it was on. I really don't. But I know they wanted to keep things quite, you know, not, and especially at the end I don't think they did. Because we had to keep our lights down, you know, and not to, you could sit like this but, I mean, to have everything outside.

FEENEY: Well, here at Ellis at night were you required to pull the shades down on all the windows or things?

HAMM: Well, we always did usually anyway, because, you know, we always had the shades pulled. We didn't not want . . .

FEENEY: Were there any sort of blackouts or air raid drills or anything like that that you had to observe here at Ellis?

HAMM: Well, we sort of had some that, of course, where could we go. We'd just have to have them go to the ferry or go out there, because where else could they do?

FEENEY: Were there any shelters in the basement or anything?

HAMM: Well, they could have done that, but they didn't do that in that respect, I guess they had to, and probably when the Coast Guard would pull up with more of their own equipment anyway, you know, right away. They weren't too far from here, whereas the Coast Guard down by where the firehouse is, I think down by there, they were not too far out, you know, from them.

SIGRIST: I want to ask you sort of an interesting question. Did you ever do anything wrong, or were you ever punished when you were here for any reason, or did any of your colleagues do anything incorrectly? I'm just sort of curious what the reprimand policy was here on the island?

HAMM: I don't know. I wasn't, I can't . . . They won't let you, if you gave a wrong medicine or if you really wasn't good to the patients or anything like that, you would get reprimanded, you know, for this stuff, and it was always, it always was the night supervisor, but I didn't bother. I liked the, everyone really nice, you know.

FEENEY: Do you remember seeing any of the people who were detained here at Ellis Island, some of the enemy aliens who they were detaining here during the war?

HAMM: Uh-uh, no, I didn't see them.

FEENEY: Did you have any sense that that was going on here at that time?

HAMM: No. Because I guess from here they, maybe the other Public, see, that's a lot different because they had the police right there, they had everything right there over on the island, you see, that's a big. But here they wouldn't have that, I don't think that they had anything like that, you see, that they could do. But I know when the boat come over they looked at and inspect the boat, I guess, and everything, you see. And the boat, I know it's called "the boat", (she laughs), the ferry. And they did that. And at one o'clock they knew it was all over, you know, that no one else could get in here. And, of course, they had guards, I think, that waited around there to see if somebody, you know, you never know when people, of course, would try to get in maybe with their boats or ships or whatever it is, but they wouldn't try it. Maybe there's so many ships, they're boats and everything else today, but there wasn't then.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed visitors on the island?

HAMM: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: If you wanted to have friends or anything out on the Island?

HAMM: Oh, yeah. Some of my, well, they did. In the summer they came down, because I had my cousins come. And, of course, my mother was sick, so my people couldn't come anyway, but they would like to see what Staten Island, where it was, that

Ellis Island was like.

SIGRIST: Did you give them a little tour of some sort?

HAMM: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Did they stay overnight on the island?

HAMM: No, they didn't stay over.

SIGRIST: (he pauses) Well, let's talk a little bit about you leaving the Island. What happened to get you off of Ellis? Why did you leave?

HAMM: Well, they called and told me that my mother was very ill because she had the very high blood pressure, and then she had a very severe stroke, and they gave me a leave to come up, and that's what the doctor said to me when I got back home to Vermont. This is what, you know, you were very lucky that you did what you did because the war was really on then. And he said, "You could get a leave from them because they . . ." And they knew you could come back, so . . .

SIGRIST: From the Public Health Service?

HAMM: Yes. And then the, in July, uh, you see I came, I went back in September, and then I came back again in July. I think it was September, yes, June. No, I came here in September. I left in June, uh, July and then I was home in August and September. She got better, so in September I came back, but I said, "I'll be back down in September." I gave them the notice and they said, "We are so, you know,

overbooked here on the big hospital in Stapleton," that they said, "You will have to go there." Because they need the nurses more, and there was a lot more to do there, because they were, the boats, this is where the ships came in.

FEENEY: So did you serve there for the duration of the war?

HAMM: Yes, seven years I was there.

SIGRIST: Oh, so beyond the war.

HAMM: Yes. And that's why I guess I got to know more the people, and know the people today, and my friend that's sitting out there was a nurse with me, and she came from Troy and I came from up in someplace in Albany, and I came back the other place, and then I said it's great to know the people. They were very friendly, you know, when you stayed seven years. This place I didn't get to know the people.

FEENEY: Anything that stands out in your mind about your experience with the hospital at Stapleton?

HAMM: Oh, yes, it was quite, especially when those two ships crashed. Yes, that was a biggie, and then, of course . . .

FEENEY: So you were on duty then?

HAMM: No, I wasn't on till the next day, but there was still a lot of action. But also when what did meet was very surprising to me was when the war ended I was there, and the ships that came in from overseas, and the ambulances would be lined up a

mile. Not for us, but for, they made Willowbrook's big place that they had bought, they made it a hospital for the army, and they were coming in. There was like a mile of, you know, ambulances coming in to keep the ships, because two or three were coming in at a time. That's where the ships came in. And they were heavily booked there. It was really, it was really busy. You were much busier there than you were here, but . . .

SIGRIST: You were getting very different kinds of, uh, casualties, injuries.

HAMM: Yes, patients. They were big, you know, it was the big stuff, and they did well, you know. And they had the equipment, they had the, every single floor had, you know, either pediatrics. Then of course there was intensive care, and it was the big stuff. We didn't have, like, intensive care, as I remember. I guess we couldn't have had it, no.

SIGRIST: I see.

FEENEY: So then everything changed radically after the war, then the type of patients that you were dealing with and even the number of patients, I suppose.

HAMM: Oh, yes. Well, that's why they're out now. Public Health is gone, and other hospital is barely seen now, the one I worked at.

FEENEY: So you left in what year? 1950 . . .

HAMM: I left in 1952. Uh-huh.

FEENEY: Why did you leave the Public Health Service at that point?

HAMM: Oh, because I got married and then I worked a couple places, and after that I didn't work much. And then I went, after the children got into school, then I went to Willowbrook and worked there for eighteen years. After that I went through an A-1, and that was interesting, too, but not as interesting as Stapleton, you know, or here, for that matter.

SIGRIST: Well, and what an interesting time to be, you know, you were sort of at the right place at the right time in terms of interesting things happening, and certainly World War II.

HAMM: Oh, yes. It certainly was, and it was great, too.

SIGRIST: Well, I want to thank you for coming to Ellis and for telling us a great deal, actually, about the operations that were going on here on the island. It's a period that we don't know a whole lot about and we're trying to put the pieces . . .

HAMM: Well, they weren't big operations, you know, like you would have over at the other place.

SIGRIST: No, when I say "operations" I mean just . . .

HAMM: Yes, operations as it is, you know, that they had.

SIGRIST: You know, just sort of the goings-on of what was going on here. Thank you.

HAMM: Okay. It was very nice. I'm sorry that I ever said "boats." I'm so used to seeing boats instead of the ferry that I should . . .

FEENEY: Don't let the Coast Guard people hear you. They'll get angry.

HAMM: I know they would. (they laugh)

FEENEY: We made the same mistake in a recent interview with some Coast Guard people. (they laugh)

HAMM: You did? The boats. You think that's a boat?

FEENEY: They reminded us that a boat is something that can be carried by a ship.

HAMM: Yes. That's right. A ship. They want to be sure that you've said the right thing, or a ferry.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.