

EI-999

JOHN GRAF

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COAST GUARD, ELLIS ISLAND, 1942

AGE: 18

LEVINE: Today is May 11th, 1998, and I'm here in Spruce Head, Maine, with John George Graf, who was a Coast Guard stationed at Ellis Island when he was about eighteen years old, in 1942, for a period of two or three weeks.

GRAF: Correct

LEVINE: Okay, if we could just start at the beginning, if you would say when you were born?

GRAF: February 19th, 1924.

LEVINE: And you were born in Chelsea, you said, Chelsea, Mass. Did you live there up until the time you joined the Coast Guards?

GRAF: No, I lived several different places before I went in the Coast Guard. I lived in Revere, and East Boston. I lived in New York for a short time, West Seventeenth Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenue. Then I went back to Revere, and went and joined the—well, I joined the Coast Guard in 1942, and when I go into the Coast Guard, the Navy took over when the war broke out. So I was stationed on two or three different ships that were Coast Guard, but Navy—under the Navy command. And I was waiting for a ship, and they sent me over to Ellis Island to wait for a ship. And I got, like I say, two to three weeks, and finally I got a ship out of Pier Six in New York. That was the Naval Base in Staten Island. And from there, it's kind of hard. I was

on convoy duty on the North Atlantic, taking, picking up convoys, and taking them across, and back and forth, and back up and down the coast, picking them up from where they come across, from Panama Canal and down around South America, and then bringing them—[tape off/on]

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming here. So when you say a convoy, what would pick up, and what would you--?

GRAF: Well, a convoy is ships, troop ships, and going across, and cargo ships [unclear] Boy, that's good. We were on escort vessels. That's what they called it, escort vessels. This one of them was what they called a DE, which is a destroyer escort. And we usually ran five ships. We had a SOPA, which was a Superior Officer Present Afloat on the lead ship. Then we had the ship on the starboard, and a ship on the port side. And then we had two ships on the rear quarter, which was the starboard and port. So we had five ships. Then occasionally we picked up a sixth escort vessel, to pick up what we called stragglers—when a ship got straggling behind. And of course, the waters were infested with German subs, U-boats.

LEVINE: Did you ever see any, or--?

GRAF: Oh, yeah, as a matter of fact, I was about—we got the, when the war ended, we captured the first German sub that surrendered. And they had Japanese aboard it, that they were trying to head for Japan with it. But they were picked up, and we got them. And I have pictures of the—General Kessel was on there. He led the Luftwaffe into Poland, and his pilot, and they had—we had them all aboard the ship. That was on the U.S.S. Argo, that we picked them up.

LEVINE: What was that like, having enemy [unclear]?

GRAF: They were very arrogant—very arrogant! The German, the soldier, the sailors themselves weren't as arrogant as the Naval officers. And we had some storm troopers, SS troopers, who were on that submarine also. And we also got the control box that controlled that V2, V1 bomb, there, the Buzz Bomb, they called it, that they were remote control of. And they were firing over England from Germany, and we had that aboard the ship. Of course, that was all high confidential stuff. Nobody could—I carried it from one place to another, but it was something else. And then, of course, the war ended. Germany surrendered, and then the Japanese surrendered in August of 1945, I guess it was. And then I got out in '46, 1946.

LEVINE: Why was it you joined the Coast Guard in the beginning?

GRAF: To get in as quick as I could, because the Navy was filled up at the time. So I went right back down to the Coast Guard Base, which was in Boston, which

was in the State House in Boston, and that was under the Treasury Department at the time. And they wanted people, you know, they wanted servicemen as fast as they could get them. So they told me I could go right in, so I went right in. And that's how I happened to get into the Coast Guard. But after that, like I say, the Navy took over. Like, some of my—I got a couple of commendations, like at the—for above and beyond the call of duty. And I got two of them, two commendation ribbons.

LEVINE: For something specific that you did?

GRAF: Rescuing people. I was in on the rescue when the Saint Augustine got sunk, and we rescued as many as we could. I don't want to talk about that.

LEVINE: Okay, yeah, wow. Okay, so tell me then, when you were at Ellis Island, do you remember anything about what it looked like, or anything like that?

GRAF: Well, no, 'cause [laughs] all I—I got on the ferry at South Ferry, and go to Ellis Island. And like I said, I was studying at the time to be a gunner's mate, and I had some material. And I'd go—there was this large room, and there were bunk beds stacked up all over the place, and you found yourself a bunk. And they had some tables that you could write letters, or study, or do anything like that. And that's what I did. Like I say, in that three weeks' time, and being only like eighteen years old [laughs] I can't remember much of anything!

LEVINE: Right.

GRAF: I did walk around one time, and I said, "My gosh! This is where the immigrants came! And what they must have thought when they saw this big rock, like, in the middle of the ocean!" And I said, but, they—

LEVINE: Did you have any connection in your family with anybody coming through Ellis Island that you know of?

GRAF: No, never. No. My grandfather and grandmother came over from, well, my grandmother was German, and my grandfather was Swiss. That's where the Graf name came from.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

GRAF: And my mother's family name was Wright, like the Wright brothers; they were some relation to the Wright brothers.

LEVINE: Hm, wow!

GRAF: And that's how, I mean, they were here, I guess, when the Mayflower come over! [Laughs] But that's about I really know about it.

LEVINE: Well, were there a lot of Coast Guard people there, when you were there?

GRAF: Seemed as though there was, yeah. There was, like I say, there was the big room with all these bunk beds, and people were coming in, and they were shuffling people back and forth so many different times, that it was, I mean, pretty hard to tell who's going to be here next, and when you were going. And finally somebody'd come over the public address, and say your name and your serial number, and you were gone! So, that's how they did it. Like I say, they came over, and they assigned you to different places, and you'd pick up your ship like at Pier Six in New York, or Pier Eight in Staten Island, New York. That's how I got started. And I was always into the Third Naval District, out of the Third Naval, 'cause the First Naval District was Boston; the Third Naval District was New York.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRAF: And I was always out of the Third Naval.

LEVINE: So most of the Coast Guard men who were there when you were there—it seemed like they were waiting? They were like, in transition, just waiting for an assignment?

GRAF: Oh, just waiting for different assignments, yes.

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh. And did you see anything like enemy aliens? Any Germans, Italians, Japanese, who were being held at Ellis Island at that time?

GRAF: No, not at Ellis, no. Like I say, the only—well, when we got all the prisoners off the sub. Actually we got a second submarine, too, and I've got a lot of that stuff, you know, photographs of these people. But as I say, that was all top-secret stuff. A lot of it was, and we weren't supposed to have it. I had a few souvenirs that I brought back from—you know, like I say, the German sailors were all right, but the higher echelons, the—

LEVINE: Officers.

GRAF: --officers, they were very arrogant. Matter of fact, the Captain of the submarine, the first one we got—we pulled into Portland Navy Yard, and that's where we brought the submarine. And on the way down, they'd bussed them down after that. The Marines took them down, the United States Marines took them down in busses, and the Captain broke his monocle, and cut his wrist, and killed himself.

LEVINE: Wow!

GRAF: So that's one of the things.

LEVINE: So in other words, when you got a submarine, then you handed over the people that were on it to the Marines?

GRAF: Yeah, to the—well, to the Naval Base in Portsmouth, Naval Base in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

LEVINE: So you had to get them to there?

GRAF: Oh, yeah. We took them aboard the ship, and we had some of them were down in the paint locker. Some were down in what we called the lazarette [ph], which was—and then the forecandle, and stuff like that. And we took them down there, and fed them, of course. And we brought them into Portsmouth, and then we'd unload them. The Marines—we had a small group of Marines aboard the ship also. And we were armed with M-2, M-1 machine guns. But they never made any effort to—they didn't want to make any effort to escape, or anything. Like I say, they took them off, and that was the end of that.

LEVINE: Wow.

GRAF: And then like I say, we got one more after that. But during, well, during the war we were fired on many times, and you know, submarines, surface fire. We ran with the Icarus, and the Icarus got a submarine, then captured their crew.

LEVINE: Wow! So you saw a lot of action, it sounds like?

GRAF: A lot of it, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, when you look back on it now, how do you feel about the period of time, like being in the Coast Guard?

GRAF: I just don't ever want to go through it again, if I don't have to. So—

LEVINE: Yes.

GRAF: And I had bad flashbacks on different things. That's why I don't like to talk too much about it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRAF: Different things, like I had two serial numbers, and didn't know where I was. They didn't know who I was, I guess. I finally got it straightened out. But still, when I got sick, I had ulcers, I went over to Togus, and they had such a time trying to find my records that I gave up. I said, the doctor says, "You'll be dead before you get in there." So they put me in the hospital; they took out sixty percent of my stomach.

LEVINE: Wow, and it probably related to stress from that place?

GRAF: Oh, yeah, that's what they said. 'Cause I had shingles, too. I got shingles from coming [unclear]. One of the things I shouldn't talk about, but see, you'd be in general quarters, and you'd be on so long there'd be—you could get some Benzedrine to keep you awake. And then you couldn't get to sleep, and the pharmacist might have give you some Phenobarbital. Well, the reaction between the two causes your system to get all fouled up, and that's how I got the shingles. And I came all the way from the Naval base in Key West, Florida, all the way to Staten Island Hospital in New York. And that was a long haul, coming up.

LEVINE: With the pain of the shingles, uh-huh.

GRAF: With the pain.

LEVINE: Wow!

GRAF: It's over, like I say, and that's one of the things.

LEVINE: Yeah, you're safe, and it's over, yeah, uh-huh.

GRAF: I lost a lot of friends, but, so—

LEVINE: Did other people from—well, you weren't in Maine when you first joined up?

GRAF: Oh, no, no. I didn't come to Maine until 1946. After the war I come up here, and I wanted to see if I could get back, you know, into doing something, because jobs—you couldn't buy a job after the war was over. No, I didn't—

LEVINE: Now were you in bad shape when you got out of the war?

GRAF: Pretty—pretty—

LEVINE: Pretty shook up?

GRAF: Yeah, I was, what they call war fatigue. And they said, "Just go away where it's quiet." So I did, I came up to Maine, and I—the first job I had was on the Pauline, was a fishing, lobster smack, or wet smack. It was a good-sized

vessel. And I started getting, you know, relaxed more, and then I got different jobs. I was a mechanic; I could do mechanical work. And I did many jobs, and like I did say, up here you couldn't buy a job. And I [sighs] washed dishes at night in a restaurant, and worked in a garage part-time, days. And went on the Pauline for quite a while, and the Silas--those two ships, boats, they are. And of course, I was married and my wife was pregnant at the time. I had to work. So that was my first son. He's fifty-nine years old.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So when did you start at the prison?

GRAF: 1960—sixty something. I can't remember exactly when, but I went over there, and like I say, I was Chief of Maintenance, Security, and Chief Engineer. And I had quite a lot of responsibility there. Most of the fellows there weren't there when I first come there. Don Jake was, of course, because he'd been there for I don't know how long!

LEVINE: He was born there, I think!

GRAF: Yeah, and other than that, it was—but they're a good bunch. I had a lot of respect Warden Robbins, because he backed up his men. But after that, when we had—Mullaney came in there, and Christ, he wanted to take out forty-eight of the best cells we had, because they were going to be—rehabilitate all these inmates. Well, you can rehabilitate some, but when you have forty-eight good cells, you don't want to take them out. Now they wish they had them back, of course. And then, of course, we had quite a few wardens. We had Warden Murphy. She was the Commissioner and come in as warden for a while. And then they had Paul Vestal. I don't know if you know Paul?

LEVINE: I was there during the reign of Dick Oliver.

GRAF: Oh, well, yeah.

LEVINE: Ward Murphy, and then him. They were the ones.

GRAF: Yeah, Dick Oliver, yeah. Yeah, Dick Oliver was a nice person, but he was too lenient, really—too lenient. And then, when you had a problem you had to really—

LEVINE: Convince him of the security aspects.

GRAF: Convince him, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Wow, well let's see. Is there anything else that you would say about either Ellis Island or New York City around that time, when you were there, before you actually got involved in the war?

GRAF: No, because like I say, I just—I wasn't there long enough, and I didn't stay in one place long enough. I know when I lived in New York, I loved New York, anyway! I thought it was great! Of course, Boston, I lived—born and dragged up in Boston, and New York to me was so much better than Boston was, 'cause, I don't know. Just, Times Square and everything, boy!

LEVINE: It's exciting, yeah, uh-huh.

GRAF: Exciting. Yeah. I often said I was going back, but I never did. Matter of fact, my mother and father passed away, and all my—I got a sister in California, and my brother lived in Mass and he's dead. Most of them are all gone, so I don't even go back down to Mass.

LEVINE: Well, New York might be worth a visit one day.

GRAF: Well, I'll be seventy-five next birthday, and like I say, right now my arm and legs and knees are bothering me. This damp weather we've had is pretty hard on it. I got arthritis.

LEVINE: Well, how are you enjoying your retirement years?

GRAF: Very much! I do just about what I want to do, and come down here every Monday and work with my son. He's a service technician for Sears, and he has Sunday and Monday off. And I buy what I want. I bought that—I got that new truck there, that's my new truck.

LEVINE: Oh, that's lovely! That's great!

GRAF: I've got a—my wife's got a nice Concorde, Chrysler. And I bought an ATV, and I, you know, all-terrain vehicle, and I ride that, and I enjoy it. I'm enjoying as much as I can! [Laughs] And I do a little fishing, and I don't hunt anymore, but—

LEVINE: Was working at the prison anything like being in the service?

GRAF: In a way, yes, I'd say. In a way. But working at the prison, and a maximum security like that, you have to be very careful of everything: what you do, how you handle yourself, and how you handle an inmate. And I take pride in the way I handled the inmates, and I had a lot of—a lot of compliments from different inmates, after they got out, on what I did for them. And it makes you feel good!

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful!

GRAF: Makes you feel good.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. I know, I was the first woman in the, as a psychologist there, and I had to be very careful of just what you're talking about, yeah.

GRAF: Yeah, uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Yeah, well that's a nice satisfaction, to have helped somebody like that.

GRAF: Yeah, I did. I helped a lot of them. I got them on furloughs when they knew that they probably could never get a furlough. And they trusted—I trusted them because they trusted me. You know, as far as, they'd come to me with different things. But at the end of it there it got so bad that the Civil Liberties Union was in on it, and we were in court all the time, on different things. Foolish things! I mean, they were sentenced there for hard labor—they should work! And my contention was, hey, if you don't work, you don't eat; you don't get paid! And we built the number plate shop for the state of Maine, saved them a hundred thousand dollars by building it with inmate labor, and I worked all the inmates. I said, "You work, you're going to be rewarded." And they—they liked that. When they were rewarded with something, they did. But if they didn't do it, they weren't rewarded. And that's the way I worked it.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like your responsibilities were a lot greater than security alone.

GRAF: They were. Well, like whenever anybody hung themselves, or there was a body, [unclear] took care of it.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

GRAF: Yeah, and a lot of them kind of shied away from it. But, I mean, I dealt with death so much that it didn't bother me that much when I was over there. But I mean, you feel bad when a young fellow hangs himself or something like that. Really makes you wonder what was going through their mind. But we had quite a lot of deaths over there. And that's about the way it is, and now I just try to enjoy myself! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah, well you look wonderful! You look healthier than you probably feel.

GRAF: Well, right now, like I say, it's—my arthritis is kind of bothering me, but I try to do as much as I can. And my wife and I, we walk a mile, two miles every day.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful!

GRAF: We always do.

LEVINE: That's great.

GRAF: Rain, shine, winter, summer. Even the black flies, and oh, are they thick up there! Oh!

LEVINE: Now?

GRAF: Oh, terrible!

LEVINE: In Warren, is that where?

GRAF: No, no, up in Liberty.

LEVINE: Oh, Liberty, uh-huh.

GRAF: Liberty, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay, well unless you can think of something that maybe we might have talked about that we didn't--?

GRAF: No, I really can't. 'Cause, I mean, my life after I got out the service was just confined to Maine, and getting by, and trying to make a living. When I worked at the prison I was involved in many things, many different chores and tasks. And I mean, I can't think of anything. I enjoyed working at the prison until the very end of it, and it was kind of on my nerves after a while, but I didn't let it bother me that much. And, no, I just said, "Well, I guess I'll throw in the towel, and retire, and build a new home." Because I had a home in Rockland, and then I sold that, and I built a new home right on a lake up there. Built it all myself, other than—

LEVINE: Wonderful!

GRAF: --the sheet rock, and I had to have that done. And my son here and I did all the wiring and all the plumbing. We did the building, and it was quite a—

LEVINE: Huh. Well, it sounds like you've had a lot of satisfactions—

GRAF: I have, yeah.

LEVINE: --in one way or another, in your life, too.

GRAF: I have, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, I'm delighted that I went to the breakfast, and got to talk to you!

GRAF: I'm sorry that at first I didn't recognize you, and I—see, I never was in the Dep's office very much, other than sometimes when Demith was in there, I'd go in on count, because Demith was—

LEVINE: He wasn't that good on the count, was he?

GRAF: Not very good, and he had an awful attitude anyway, Ken Demith did.

LEVINE: Yeah, he was a prankster, in a way.

GRAF: Yeah, so I'd go in there lots of times just to get, when the count was going on, or something. Then I'd get right into the dining room, because there's where your trouble starts; you have a real problem. And once they see somebody in there, the inmates, like myself, not bragging, but they'd say, "Oh, the Chief is in here! The Chief is in here." So you know, I'd walk around; I'd speak to them and say, "How you doing?" and all that, and I think it made an impression on them.

LEVINE: They weren't apt to act up when you were there?

GRAF: They didn't—very seldom acted up when I was in there, that I know of.

LEVINE: Well, I know the kitchen crew were the roughest crew in the prison.

GRAF: Yeah.

LEVINE: Weren't they?

GRAF: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: They all went for the—I think they went for food. I had this theory that they were so deprived, that they wanted to be where the food was.

GRAF: Yeah.

LEVINE: And they were very rough.

GRAF: Yeah, they were.

LEVINE: I mean, a lot of—it seems to me a few murders took place in the kitchen while I was there.

GRAF: Oh, yeah, the one of them there where the guy got hit with a two-by-four. They beat him all to heck, down in the lower part of the kitchen. And another couple of guys got stabbed in there, but they didn't die. And we had the place rigged with gas, tear gas—bad things happened in there, we just pulled a switch, and we could gas them, tear gas them. And once they got tear gas in you can handle them fairly good.

LEVINE: Did you ever have to tear gas them?

GRAF: No, no. No, but they knew it was there.

LEVINE: There, uh-huh.

GRAF: They knew it was there.

LEVINE: Wow. Okay, well thank you so much for taking up your time. And I've been speaking with John Graf, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on May 11th, 1998. And I'm here in Spruce Head, Maine, signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]