

KM-033

VICE ADMIRAL THOMAS REECE SARGENT, III

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INTERVIEWER: KATE MOORE

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ENGLAND, 1923

AGE 8

PASSAGE ON "THE LEVIATHAN"

DETAINED ON "THE PRESIDENT POLK" PRIOR TO IMMIGRATION PROCESSING

MOORE: Good afternoon. This is Kate Moore for the National Park Service. Today is the 25th of January 1994, and I'm in . . .

SARGENT: Lake San Marcos.

MOORE: Lake San Marcos.

SARGENT: California.

MOORE: California, at the home of Vice Admiral Thomas Sargent III, who came from England in 1923 when he was eight-and-a-half years old. Why don't you begin by giving us your full name and date of birth, please?

SARGENT: My full name is Thomas Reece Sargent, and I'm the third. I was born on December 20, 1914.

MOORE: And how do you spell Reece?

SARGENT: R-E-E-C-E, and that's a Welsh name, and evidently a family name from way back.

MOORE: And where were you born, again? You were born . . .

SARGENT: I was born in the Woolwich, Plumstead, south of London, in my grandmother's house on Evertree Road.

MOORE: Could you spell Woolwich for me?

SARGENT: W-O-O-L-W-I-C-H.

MOORE: All right. And what size town was that?

SARGENT: It's a suburb of London, and I would assume something like two hundred thousand people.

MOORE: And what did most people in that suburb do? What was the industry in that area?

SARGENT: They were working class people because the Woolwich Arsenal, which was very famous during World War One, is located right close by.

MOORE: And the arsenal was famous for what?

SARGENT: The manufacture of explosives, projectiles, guns, whatever. Anything used in wartime to kill people.
(he laughs)

MOORE: What was your father's name?

SARGENT: My father's name was the same as mine, except he was the second.

MOORE: And what was his occupation?

SARGENT: He was a machinist in England, a laborer/machinist in England. And after we came to this country he became a, what they call a jig and tool designer in the machinery field.

MOORE: What did he look like, your father?

SARGENT: Something like me. He had the same hairline, that's for sure. A rather handsome man, more handsome than I. He was about five foot six, I believe. Well-built, educated to the eighth grade, but well-read, extremely well-read. He was an admirer of Charles Dickens, and he could recite passages from many of the volumes.

MOORE: And what was his temperament, personality like?

SARGENT: He was a gentle, fine, upstanding man.

MOORE: Was there a story about your father that you associate with your childhood?

SARGENT: Oh, not really, except that Dad was a rather Puritan in his ways. He would always tell me that women were ladies, always ladies until proven otherwise, and that we should treat them as such. We used to go fishing together, camping together. He was just a good father. He also taught me to box, he was a good boxer, and a great singer, too. He used to sing all the time.

MOORE: Do you remember any songs he used to sing?

SARGENT: Oh, gosh, not off hand, no.

MOORE: What was your mother's name?

SARGENT: Mother was Rose Chapman.

MOORE: And that was her maiden name, Chapman?

SARGENT: Her maiden name was Chapman, yes.

MOORE: And what was her occupation?

SARGENT: She was a seamstress before she was married, then became a housewife.

MOORE: What did she look like?

SARGENT: She was dark. Tall, almost as tall as my dad, and quite thin.

MOORE: And what was her personality and temperament?

SARGENT: She was an extreme Puritan. She wouldn't tolerate anything that was off-color. She abhorred even a "damn" or a "hell." She, oh, I'm just trying to think of something that, oh, yes, she, any girl that I brought home after I was in high school, she would look at her and say, "Where are your gloves?" You know, you always wore gloves when you went out on a date. Things like that.

MOORE: And is there a story that you associate with your mother in childhood?

SARGENT: The only thing that I can think of really is the fact that she must have had a great intestinal fortitude to pack two children, my sister and I, and come to the United States alone, never having been out of London more than seventy miles. This was the first trip she had ever taken out of England, and certainly the first trip out of southern England.

MOORE: Well, you say you have a sister. And what is your sister's name?

SARGENT: My sister's name is Phyllis Rose Sargent, oh, gosh. (he whispers) She's been married four times.

MOORE: Oh, I see. (she laughs) All right. And she's your younger sister?

SARGENT: No, she's older than I am, by three years, yes.

MOORE: Three years older. Do you have any brothers?

SARGENT: No, only the two of us.

MOORE: And do you remember back in England, your house that you lived in?

SARGENT: I lived in several of them. I was born in, as I said, in my grandmother's house. We lived with my grandmother for quite a few years, during the war years, and a few years after. And then we moved to

Crayford in Kent, and we lived on Whitehill Road. It was one of those row houses. I remember I went back to see it a few years ago, quite a few years ago. The road is much smaller than I remember. It was a two-story house. The living room, I remember, had red tile. The kitchen had the usual big stove in it. The hot water was heated with gas, of course, and had a geyser, we called a geyser. You had to light it first, and wait for the thing to heat up before you could get any hot water. We had a scullery rather than a kitchen, you see.

MOORE: What is a scullery?

SARGENT: That's where you washed, washed the dishes and washed your clothes and there was a storage place for food, and that's about it.

MOORE: What about, how was it lit, again, the house?

SARGENT: The house was lit by gas.

MOORE: And how about plumbing?

SARGENT: We had indoor plumbing, yes. One bathroom, upstairs.

MOORE: And heated by?

SARGENT: By (he laughs) fireplaces. There was no, you had to have a gas, there was a gas fireplace, as I recall, and that was the only heat we had.

MOORE: What about your grandmother's house? What do you remember about that?

SARGENT: My grandmother's house is quite small. I was born in the upstairs left-hand bedroom facing it.

MOORE: And how many bedrooms were there?

SARGENT: That had, I think, three. We lived, the four of us lived in the one bedroom, as I recall.

MOORE: During the war years, you said.

SARGENT: During the war years, because I was born the first year of the war, and I re, the first thing I remember was in 19, I guess it was around 1917 or 1918, a zeppelin being shot down. It was pointed out to me by my father. He picked me up and said, "Look up there." The zeppelin coming down, all burning.

MOORE: (There is an electric saw in the background on the tape.) (break in tape) Now, when you talk about your grandmother, whose mother was that?

SARGENT: That was my father's mother.

MOORE: And from there you went to Kent to live.

SARGENT: That's right. We, Dad moved, we moved to Kent when Dad was, left the Woolwich Arsenal and obtained a job in Vickers Company, which is in, across Crayford.

MOORE: And in your row house that you lived in, did you have a garden?

SARGENT: Somewhat. With the house came a plot of land, which was up the street from the houses, and each house had a little strip of land, and we used to plant vegetables there. The front was just grass, and so was the back yard.

MOORE: Did you keep animals at all?

SARGENT: No, no. We never had animals.

MOORE: And what, the row house, how far from the center of town was that?

SARGENT: Oh, about a mile. Crayford is very small. It's, the only industry there at that time was Vickers Company, a manufacturer of engines and parts and things. But the town was probably about fifty thousand.

MOORE: And, so it was only your family that lived in that row house.

SARGENT: That's right.

MOORE: And how many bedrooms did that have?

SARGENT: That had two.

MOORE: Now, who did the cooking in the family?

SARGENT: Mother always did the cooking.

MOORE: And what was your favorite food as a child?

SARGENT: Oh, as a child, let's see. We had porridge for breakfast, always porridge for breakfast. (electronic music is heard) Oh, dear. (break in tape)

MOORE: How about your favorite food?

SARGENT: Oh, yes, steak and kidney pie. Oh, my gosh. Any, English bacon is delightful. An English breakfast is also delightful, with bangers and (he laughs) the bacon and eggs and toast, or a English muffin, or a crumpet.

MOORE: Did you ever cook yourself?

SARGENT: I barbecue. That's all I do now.

MOORE: Describe the kitchen at home where your mother cooked in the house in Kent?

SARGENT: That was in the, actually that was a kind of a kitchen eating area, where, quite large. The, my wife can tell you the name of the type of stove. It runs continuously. It's gas-fired, very heavy and big. And we had a round table which we ate from, so that we ate really in the kitchen with the stove right next to us. That was the warmest room in the house in the wintertime. Of course, it had a gas mantle above the table and, we had to light those gas mantles for light in the evening. Moths always were a hazard because they would fly into the gas mantle, and then you would have burned moth and everything else over the table.

MOORE: So what was mealtime like? When was your largest meal of the day?

SARGENT: The largest meal of the day was really at noon, and we had, then we would always have a little afternoon tea, and then supper at night. Supper consisted of maybe sandwiches and a few sweets, cookies and biscuits and tea.

MOORE: And where, you said your grandmother lived in near London. Were there any other relatives that lived nearby?

SARGENT: Oh, yes. My mother's sister and my maternal grandmother lived in the, oh, gosh, uh, Battersea which is right in London, right on the river, right on the Thames. And they lived in a very small row house on Green Lane. That was bombed out during World War Two. So my grandmother died, my maternal grandmother died during World War Two because she was, fell down and broke her hip trying to get away from the air raid, and she never recovered.

MOORE: Were you, whom were you especially close to in your family?

SARGENT: Well, directly behind us, when we lived in Crayford, was my cousin and my paternal aunt Tooley used to live back there, and my cousin Joyce and her brother Ted. Ted was a very small baby, but Joyce was a year younger than I. And we used to play together in England. My cousin Peggy was a baby. She was on the maternal side, and my cousin Clifford was my age, but, because they were in London and we didn't see them. I saw Joyce in 1990 after about sixty years. We had quite a reunion. She lives, they live in New Zealand, in Waitari, New Zealand. It was quite a . . .

MOORE: Can you spell Waitari.

SARGENT: W-A-I-T-A-R-I, believe it or not.

MOORE: And what was that like, that reunion?

SARGENT: Uh, traumatic. We were in a hotel, and I called Joyce and told her we were in town, and they, she and her husband came down, and I opened the door, and she looked at me and she said, "Tom, you've lost all your curly hair." And I said, "Joyce, you've gotten a little gray." (he laughs) And then we hugged. It was a very, very nice, she's a delightful person, she really is.

MOORE: And so she was one of your closest childhood friends.

SARGENT: She was, yeah, she really was.

MOORE: Now, what was religious life like back in England at that time? You said your mother was Puritan.

SARGENT: They weren't demonstrative religious, if I can put it that way. We went to church, but not very often. She made sure we went to Sunday school, and of course, it was in the Church of England. But to go continuously to church, no, we never did. But she was, she made sure that we could make our own choice on whatever religion we might want to embrace, but we did not go to church continuously, no.

MOORE: And was there a house of worship, was there a church near by you?

SARGENT: Well, it was in Dartford, which is the next town below Crayford.

MOORE: And how did, did you practice religion in the home in terms of prayers or grace or anything at all?

SARGENT: No, never.

MOORE: All right. So you never had any religious persecution or prejudice of any sort.

SARGENT: No.

MOORE: (?) (they laugh) What about holiday celebrations? What about Guy Fawkes Day?

SARGENT: Oh, Guy Fawkes Day we used to always have fireworks. Birthdays, you might get a very, very small present. Christmas was a time of, of just having a good meal, and you got one present, and that was it.

MOORE: What type of meal did you have?

SARGENT: Well, we usually used to have ham, good English ham, and potatoes and peas and lots of gravy.

MOORE: Christmas cake.

SARGENT: Christmas cakes. (a clock chimes in the background)
Oh, yes, we had to have Christmas pudding. Christmas
pudding with some good Irish whiskey poured over it.
(he laughs)

MOORE: What about school life in England?

SARGENT: That was, that's a little vague at this time. We went
to school in Dartford, which is south of Crayford,
about a mile away, and we used to walk. I remember
that Phyllis, my sister, and I walked that way. And
Mother, before we left, would say, "Now, you go
straight to school and don't talk to the gypsies."
That was her first, the last thing she said when we
left from the home. Gypsies had those wagons, you
know. They used to run up and down. In England they
traveled all over the place, and there were lots of
rumors about them, but I guess they were nice people.
I don't remember too much about class teaching at all,
but I know that the teachers were very strict. If you
disobeyed an order or made a noise, you got a rap on
the knuckles with a ruler. I got several of those, I
remember.

MOORE: Were there canings?

SARGENT: Oh, yeah, right across the top of your knuckles with a
ruler, the flat of a ruler. But that's all I do
remember about it.

MOORE: Do you remember your favorite subject? You were very
young then.

SARGENT: No, I guess geography was probably the best thing, my
favorite subject at that time.

MOORE: And what did you do for entertainment as a child, what
types of games did you play?

SARGENT: Well, we played what they call rounders, which is very
similar to baseball, or hide and seek and the usual
street games. We had a family down the street that had
two boys, the name of the Tattersolls[ph]. And we
always used to play together, my sister and Joyce and
the Tattersolls[ph]. That's about all we really did.

MOORE: Did you play cricket, or football?

SARGENT: No, we didn't have enough room. There were no fields
around there, so we played in the street.

MOORE: And who decided to come to America? How did it happen
that your family came here?

SARGENT: Well, my dad and Ted Tooley, the, my uncle who lived

behind us, were both machinists, and having a very difficult time making ends meet. And finally in 1922 the Tooleys decided they were going to emigrate to New Zealand, and they left. This kind of gave it, it was a void in our area, of course, because Joyce left. And then on account of the atmosphere changed at home, and Mother and Dad used to talk at long lengths about how they were going to make ends meet and how they were going to educate the two of us. Finally the upshot of this whole thing was that how it really came about, but anyway Dad decided that we were going to go to the United States. And so they sold everything they had except Mother's treadle sewing machine, and Dad left in June of 1923, and he went to Canada.

MOORE: Can we back up just a bit, if I may interrupt.

SARGENT: Yes.

MOORE: Do you remember the discussion between your parents about pros and cons? Do you remember anything that they said?

SARGENT: The only thing I remember that they said was that we could go to New Zealand, but that's an awful long way away. That's halfway around the world, and we'll never get back to England. So Dad said, "Well, the United States is the growing country, and I think we should go there." And so we finally decided to go to the United States.

MOORE: When they made, they talked about this decision, was the intent to come back to England ever?

SARGENT: No. No, they realized that once they left they could never come back.

MOORE: Why not?

SARGENT: Because of the, they couldn't quite see any improvement in the economic growth of Great Britain, and they thought that the best thing to do was to educate us over there and become U.S. citizens and sever all connections with Great Britain.

MOORE: Do you remember the selling of things in your house? Do you remember that?

SARGENT: No, I don't remember it. All I remember is the stuff disappearing, and we finally ended up with a bare house and a treadle sewing machine. Some people came in and crated it, and we put clothes and other little knickknacks . . .

MOORE: What type of knickknacks?

SARGENT: Well, they were little dishes that Mother had that she

wanted to keep, and pots and pans and something to start housekeeping with, and this sewing machine. The reason for the sewing machine was Mother, being a seamstress, made our clothes. She made my little suits. She made Phyllis' dresses. She did, she turned Dad's collars when they wore out, and the cuffs of his shirts. She did all those things that, in order to save money. And Dad left and, as I say, he went to Canada. The reason he went to Canada was because he was born there, and he told me later, I asked him why he went through to Canada, and he said, "Well, I was born in Canada. That makes me a Canadian subject. There is no quota between Canada and the United States for immigrants." And he said, "I had the opportunity to go from Canada right into the United States and established myself there." And then we, Mother and Phyllis and I, moved into my paternal grandmother's house in Battersea, and we stayed there until September, and then we left.

MOORE: Now where did your father go to in the United States first?

SARGENT: He went directly to New London, Connecticut.

MOORE: Why there?

SARGENT: Why there? Because there was a man by the name of Young, I don't remember his first name, whom Dad knew in Vickers. And Mr. Young told Dad that there was a great opportunity for machinists in a place called J.N. LaPoint Company. LaPoint Company no longer exists, but at that time it was an international company. And so Dad went there.

MOORE: You're in Battersea.

SARGENT: Yes, we're in Battersea. September came and, of course, school started. And we went to school right next door to my aunt's house. And I only went there for, as I recall, for about two or three weeks. So it appears that we left for the United States the last week in September, as I recall. (break in tape)

MOORE: I'm sorry. We were talking before the break because of the microphone about the LaPoint.

SARGENT: Oh, the LaPoint Company.

MOORE: Yeah. That was actually an international machinist.

SARGENT: That's right. So then we thought that the best thing to do was to go right to the J.N. LaPoint Company in New London, Connecticut, apply for a job and see how things worked out. Well, he went down there, and it just happened that they were hiring at the time, and so he got an immediate position. He obtained a one-room in a boarding house, just a few blocks from the J.N.

LaPoint Company in Pequot Avenue in New London, Connecticut, and then wrote to Mother and said, "Come." He had previously made I guess open reservations on a British, on a, excuse me, on a United States Line ship. He was very astute. He had greater knowledge than I ever thought at the time. You know, as you grow older you realize how intelligent your parents were. But Dad had made arrangements to ship us out on a U.S. Line ship because at that time, at the end of the year, there was a possibility that we wouldn't get in the quota, and that we would be sent back. But the greater possibility to get in was by coming on a U.S. ship, because that would cost United States money to get us back. We left Battersea and went to Southampton in England, and got on board the S.S. Leviathan, which at that time was the largest ship in the world. We came over on steerage. Now, steerage is in the bowels of the ship way down near the shafts and propellers. We had a very small cabin. Mother and Phyllis slept on the lower bunk, and I slept on the upper bunk.

MOORE: If we can go back a little bit, your father's passage was paid for by whom, then? How did he pay for his original passage to Canada?

SARGENT: Oh, he paid for himself.

MOORE: He paid from the sale of the . . .

SARGENT: The sale. He sold everything, we had nothing, we had nothing when we arrived in the United States, when we arrived in the United States.

MOORE: So that the selling of all your belongings helped him to get over.

SARGENT: That's right.

MOORE: And then how did . . .

SARGENT: And paid for our passage over.

MOORE: And so, when you were leaving from your paternal grandmother's house, did you have a farewell of any sort by relatives?

SARGENT: No. There was a tearful goodbye, and we left.

MOORE: And your grandmother realized that you were going?

SARGENT: Yes. Grandmother and Aunt May realized we were going, and that was it.

MOORE: And so what port did you leave from?

SARGENT: Southampton.

MOORE: How did you get from home to Southampton?

SARGENT: By train.

MOORE: By train. And was that a tearful thing? How did your mother react? How was she holding up?

SARGENT: I don't recall, really, except that, well, she was, she was very calm, as I recall, because when we got off the train and walked down the pier to be checked through at customs and immigration, I looked out and I saw this big shape out there, and I said, "Is that the ship?" and she said, "Yes, that's the ship we're going on." That's all I recall about it. She was quite calm.

MOORE: How about your sister? How did she, was she . . .

SARGENT: Phyllis was oblivious to the whole thing. She still is oblivious to the whole thing. (they laugh) No, she was very calm. (he laughs)

MOORE: Did you bring anything with you that was of any value, or sentimental value?

SARGENT: No, no.

MOORE: Did your sister?

SARGENT: No, no.

MOORE: So you were down in steerage then.

SARGENT: In steerage, that's right.

MOORE: It was arranged, you had your own cabin.

SARGENT: We had a cabin, yes. A very small cabin.

MOORE: What about the food on the boat?

SARGENT: It was in a big dining room.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SARGENT: . . . with benches. We sat on benches. And, as I recall, and it was some kind of thrown at us. I don't remember too much about the meals at all. All I know is that the ship rolled and people were very unhappy and . . .

MOORE: Were any of you ill?

SARGENT: I got ill the first day, and Phyllis was ill the first day. Then we recovered and we were all right from then on.

MOORE: Now, what date is these? Do you remember the day . . .

SARGENT: No. That's the thing I do not know.

MOORE: Okay. And how long was your voyage then?

SARGENT: It was five days. Then we arrived in New York early morning. And this is another story, where the Mauritania, which was a Cunard Line, the British, left at the same time, and they raced across the Atlantic, and the Mauritania won. So she got in the evening before we had arrived, and she was within the quota for immigrants to the United States, and we weren't. I remember coming in, into New York because Mother brought us up on deck and she said, "Look, there's the Statue of Liberty, and this is New York." And all the skyscrapers, and things like that.

MOORE: And what was that like?

SARGENT: It was, I was awed. You know, you, at that age you just look it over now and say, "Wow, this is a new country." You know, it's completely new. You never knew what to expect. But everything was awe-inspiring. When we tied up, they found out that we couldn't get in the United States, and that they were going to keep us on board ship. (a clock chimes in the background) Well, the Leviathan had to sail, so they transferred us from the Leviathan to the President Polk.

MOORE: How do you spell that?

SARGENT: P-O-L-K.

MOORE: Oh, Polk.

SARGENT: It was named after President Polk. And, which was a much better arrangement because we were in a tourist class cabin, and we got fed tourist food, and we stayed on that ship for a week. Now, exactly what day that was, I do not recall.

MOORE: Now, this is before you ever got to Ellis Island.

SARGENT: That's right, yes, because they weren't going to let us in. And so, the idea being that Congress was going to meet and decide whether they were going to allow this group of immigrants into the United States, and they decided they would, fortunate for us. And so . . .

MOORE: What was the atmosphere in that week's wait?

SARGENT: Oh, Mother was just frantic. Dad came down from New London on a train and rented a rowboat and rowed out to the, to the President Polk, and we were, and we happened to be on deck, and he just yelled when we saw him, and he said, "I don't know what to do!" I heard

him call, "I don't know what to do!" But we, excuse me. But we, uh . . .

MOORE: So you talked to him on the rowboat.

SARGENT: Yes.

MOORE: Your mom, your mother did.

SARGENT: My mother did. And he said, "I've got everything arranged for you when you get there." And she kept on saying, "But when?" And Dad said, "I don't know. I have no idea." Anyway, her, and then he had to go back home. And that must have been on a weekend because, on a Sunday, because they worked, at that time, five days, uh, six days a week.

MOORE: So that was the only way he could make contact with you.

SARGENT: That's right. Uh-huh. That's right, because there was no way he could, he just took a chance and he found out where we were by going to the United States Lines office and found out we were on the President Polk. So he rented this rowboat, and he rowed out to see us. Well, shortly thereafter, I guess Congress came to the conclusion that they would let us in, and they off-loaded us, as I recall, either to a barge. I know we were all standing up, with a tug alongside of us, and they took us over to Ellis Island. And this was the dramatic part of it where we were taken down right straight into, towards the Great Hall. Then we were stopped and checked for, by Immigration as to who we were and where we came from, and then we were led up the steps over the Great, adjacent to the Great Hall, you know, the balcony area. And that area, at one level there was a doctor, and he looked into your eyes, and another one on the upper level checked your chest and blood pressure and asked you lots of questions about your health, particularly Mother. And then we went, as I recall, down around and back down again into the Great Hall, and there were benches and seats, and you were allotted a certain area where you were, to go down and be processed. This took, I don't know, an hour, two hours, two or three hours. We went through the, through this line and the thing I was really impressed with was the fact that the noise, the wailing and the crying, the shouting, the pushing and the shoving.

MOORE: Was it crowded, then?

SARGENT: It was crowded, and people were being separated. In other words the husband might have a case of TB, so he couldn't come in, and he was shunted off to another place, and left the children and the mother, and they were crying. It was just a horrible experience, it really was. We finally got up to the, to the desk.

And they asked Mother where she was going, and she said, "New London Connect-ticut." And the man laughed at her because she pronounced Connecticut incorrectly. And they put tags around your neck, big tags, which said your name, Great Britain, New London, Connecticut, as I recall, something like that. And then they shunted us back on the ferry, I guess it was a ferry, and took us to the Battery, loaded us on a bus and literally dumped us off at Grand Central Station. And there was Mother, who had never been out of the United States, out of England in her entire life, was in front of Grand Central Station and didn't know where to go. And she finally, she got us in hand and we walked and walked, and finally she found a ticket office and she paid her ticket to New London and found out where the train was, and we got on the train. We arrived at night because Dad, she evidently sent a telegram or something during the time we were in Grand Central Station, and he met us with a taxi at New London train depot, and loaded us on there and he took us down to his, his one room at the, in Pequot Avenue, the upstairs bedroom. In the meantime, he had rented a kitchen, which was on the second floor of this place. So he had the kitchen, a bedroom, and we had a common bath with other members of the, of the boarding house.

MOORE: Describe that taxi arriving. What was the atmosphere with your family then?

SARGENT: Oh, Mother was crying, and Phyllis was crying. I was awed. I didn't, I was just completely looking out, trying to find out where we were, and what things were going on. But it was great to see Dad again.

MOORE: Was he moved as well? Did he show his emotions?

SARGENT: Oh, yeah, I think he did. I'm not quite sure. Dad was not the emotional type at all. I'll tell you a little story about him later today. Anyway, we finally arrived at this place, went upstairs. The luggage hadn't arrived, so we were still in the same clothes we started with from New York. But Dad had arranged, we had an army cot which we slid into the bedroom, into the kitchen, and Phyllis slept on the army cot, and the trunk, fortunately, arrived, the big steamer trunk, and it had one, two, three, four, five half-round wooden straps on the thing. I remember distinctly, because I slept on it with two blankets underneath, and I slept on that thing for six months. I had indentations to prove it for a while. (he laughs) But, so I slept on that in my mother and father's room, and we stayed there for six months until we could, uh, we spent Christmas there. And then Dad was able to afford a little one-bedroom upstairs apartment in New London on Sherman Street, some distance away.

MOORE: Sherman?

SARGENT: Sherman Street, yeah.

MOORE: And what did your mother do to set up house there?

SARGENT: Uh, there was not much she could do. The big trunk, the big package arrived, the crate arrived. And they were able to get the sewing machine up there and get her pots and pans and things that she needed to set up housekeeping. And then she started making us clothes and things like that. When we moved, of course, we had a dining room, a living room with a, Dad and Mother bought a convertible sofa that went into a bed, and that's where they slept. And Dad put up a curtain across the bedroom, and so Phyllis slept on one side of that, and I slept on the other in the one bedroom, and then we had a kitchen and a bathroom.

MOORE: Did your parents, at this time, ever have any discussion about their new lives, their lives in this country? Did they have any second thoughts?

SARGENT: I don't think Dad ever did, no. Mother may have, because she always wanted to go back. But she did go back in 1931 to England for a three or four week visit, and she and Phyllis went back, and Dad and I kept house together. And, but Dad never wanted to go back.

MOORE: And when your Mother ever talked about wanting to go back, what was the reason she gave?

SARGENT: She just missed her family, that's all, yeah.

MOORE: Okay. So that, go back a little bit, the apartment that you had that you rented, was there inside plumbing?

SARGENT: Oh, yes, yeah.

MOORE: Electricity?

SARGENT: Yes.

MOORE: All right. And what happened after that in terms of your life? You started school, right?

SARGENT: I started (?) School in New London. Uh, Sherman Street was a conglomeration of people either first or second generation immigrants. There were quite a few people on that street from various countries, Armenia, Norway, Sweden, Italy, and we all got together. It was a delightful boyhood, it really was.

MOORE: And were there other English families in the neighborhood?

SARGENT: Uh, no. Oh, yes! There was one English family but, of course, they were in a far higher strata in the

economic scale than we at the time. The Nibbs. They, he was an ex-Royal Navy commander, and he was the vice president of the electric boat company, and I went to school with Phoebe, which was his daughter. And he had a, she had a brother by the name of Allan. Allan, who was several years older than I.

MOORE: So basically you lived in an immigrant neighborhood . . .

SARGENT: That's right, yeah.

MOORE: And it was a good experience.

SARGENT: It was, because there were a lot of people who, there were other people on the street who, of course, had been there for generations, but of those people that were growing up at that time were either first or second generation.

MOORE: Now, what about school? Were you ever, did you ever suffer any taunting initially when you went to school?

SARGENT: Yeah. I arrived in school in my little cap, Eton cap and trousers and short pants. In those days everybody wore plus fours, you know, and things like that. But I sat in class, very unhappy at the time because I didn't know anybody, and the teacher got up and made the worst mistake she could have. She stated, in front of the class, that we had a young, a new student, and he comes from England, and you'll recognize him because he has a rather peculiar accent. And recess came and, of course, all the kids said, "Who won the Revolutionary War?" Well, I didn't even know what the Revolutionary War was, because they didn't teach that in England. (he laughs) And, so I learned to fight at that time. It lasted for, oh, about a month, I guess, or something like that. But I did find in that school a friend, and he's still my friend. His name is Winslow Buckston. Winslow lived down the street from the school, and he came up and shook my hand, and we became friends. Now, that friendship has lasted ever since 1923. We went to grammar school together, high school together, the Coast Guard Academy together, and our kids grew up together, our wives love each other, and he lives in Seattle. (he laughs) And we still see each other.

MOORE: All right. So you were taunted, then. How long did it last?

SARGENT: About a month.

MOORE: About a month.

SARGENT: Yeah. (he laughs) And then it kind of left. They got used to me, you know.

MOORE: Did you find, as far as immigrants were concerned, only because I'm thinking about English immigrants, were you in any way preferential in class because your native language was English?

SARGENT: No, no. That was nothing like that.

MOORE: Okay. And what about your parents? How did they adapt to life here?

SARGENT: Mother had a little difficulty, far more difficulty than Dad, simply because she did the . . . (a clock chimes) Oh, dear.

MOORE: Your mother had more difficulty . . .

SARGENT: Because she did the shopping. And when you buy things at the store, they don't have the same names, you see. And she would go to the store, and people were rather cruel at times. (clock continues to chime) I remember going down with her, and she wanted some beets. And so she looked at, she said, "I'll have some of those beet roots." Well, the man laughed at her, you see, and she didn't like to be laughed at. He said, "Lady, they're beets." (he laughs) And all the other things, you know. Like she would want a, she would want a joint of meat. Well, what she wanted, of course, was a leg of lamb, see, but she said, "I want a joint of lamb." And a joint is, this fellow didn't know what she was talking about. So it was things like that. It took a while to get used to, but she recovered, and she, towards the end she really enjoyed life in the United States.

MOORE: What about religious life here, then? Did it change at all for you?

SARGENT: No. I, uh, they sent us to Sunday school again. This time we went to the Baptist church on Montauk Avenue in New London, and we used to spend Sunday school there. Then Mother didn't go to church, but they sent us to Sunday school.

MOORE: So what, did you, did any family tragedy occur during the time that your family, since the time that your family has moved to the United States? Anything happen to you that was tragic?

SARGENT: No, not really. And my mother died of cancer at the very early age of fifty-four, and it was a very tragic death, and I wasn't around. I was at sea. My wife took care of things. Dad was really upset and stricken. But that I think was the worst thing that could have happened to us.

MOORE: What happened in your life? After you went to grammar school, you became a vice admiral. How did this

happen?

SARGENT: Well, (he laughs) I went to high school in New London, and when I started high school, why, the Depression started. And, of course, I worked during the summer time as much as I could. The J.N. LaPoint Company folded up, and we moved up to a place called Hudson, Massachusetts, and I went to school at Hudson, Massachusetts. In the mean time my sister started to date, and she was dating Coast Guard cadets in New London, and they made a couple of trips up to Hudson, Massachusetts to see us, and I just became interested in the, in the Coast Guard. Furthermore, in my growing up childhood, I used to go out on boats at all, all the time and, in fact, during boat race day in New London I, we used to rent or borrow a rowboat, and we would sell the newspapers to the yachtsmen for a dollar a paper when it cost us only about three cents, and it was very lucrative. I just kind of liked the water. And after two years in Hudson, why, the J.N. LaPoint Company folded up completely, and so Dad was out of a job, and so we moved back to New London, where he was at least known as an outstanding machinist, and things got kind of rough. We went from living in the lower middle class to living hand-to-mouth again, and I couldn't get a job. I painted furnace fronts for people for a dime apiece and things like that, you know.

MOORE: What years were these?

SARGENT: This was from 1931 to about, from 1930 to '33. I went to Buckley High School in 1932, and that was an outstanding school. I had some great, wonderful teachers, and they encouraged me to go to the Coast Guard Academy, too. So in 1933 I took the exam. I was about to graduate from high school. And I came in number thirty-nine, and they took in thirty-eight, and so I was back to square one again and I couldn't get in. So I went to work in a garage, and then at the A&P store, went to school, back to school again at night, and I took the exam in 1934 and I came in thirtieth, and they took me in. And so . . .

MOORE: So you were determined.

SARGENT: Yes. It was a great disappointment not to get in in 1933, but when I look back and see my classmates, I think it was the best thing that ever happened, because I got the greatest bunch of classmates anybody ever had. Sixty-nine of us entered, twenty-three of us graduated, and there were eleven of us left.

MOORE: How many were career?

SARGENT: All of us.

MOORE: You were all career.

SARGENT: All career, all twenty-three were career.

MOORE: Were any of the other people immigrants like you, who were in the Coast Guard Academy?

SARGENT: No, nobody was an immigrant, as such. They were second generation, but that's about it.

MOORE: So you were one of, the only first generation?

SARGENT: I was unique in the whole Coast Guard Academy at the time, and I loved it. I really did. The, I'm not the most intelligent person in the world, but I had to work hard to get through, and I finally got through, and it became an ensign, and then from then on I went to sea and gradually the war started.

MOORE: What was your position during World War Two?

SARGENT: When the war started I was on a ship. The Coast Guard cutter "Modak"[ph] up in Greenland when the war started. When we came back to the United States, we were up there almost a year. When we came back to the United States, of course, things had changed. We left before the war and we came back during the war, and I was transferred from there to a commanding officer by a navy patrol craft, and we went down to the Caribbean, and I stayed down there about a year in what they call the torpedo alley. We used to seal with seventy-five ships and end up with fifty. It was a rough, a very rough time in 1942. And then we, then I went to, I was engineer officer of the Coast Guard cutter "Dwayne," and we ran convoys from New York and Boston to Casablanca and the Mediterranean. And I was on there for a year, and then I was transferred, then put a ship in commission, a navy ship, a frigate, a crew of three hundred, and I put that in commission as commanding officer. And we took a convoy from New York to Halandia[ph], New Guinea, the same convoy. I think it was the longest in the annals of the whole war, some fifteen thousand miles with the same British ships. And then I went through the invasions of Mauratai and Laitai[ph], Mendoro[ph], Mengeyan[ph]. And then they transferred the ship back to Seattle, and I took it back to Seattle, and the war ended. And . . .

MOORE: At the end of the war, what rank were you at that time?

SARGENT: I was a lieutenant commander.

MOORE: Now, you know, it's unlikely, no, it's not unlikely, it's very difficult for anyone to become a vice admiral, regardless of background, but it's even more unlikely for an immigrant who came here to become one, and what do you attribute to that? I mean, without,

you don't have to be humble, what do you think?

SARGENT: Frankly, I think I was very fortunate in getting the assignments I did. I was commanding officer of two navy ships and one Coast Guard ship, and the Coast Guard after the war, and a long time after I graduated from the Academy, they sent me to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and I became a civil engineer. And I alternated between going to sea and civil engineering work. I ended up assigned to Coast Guard headquarters in Washington as the Chief of Civil Engineering, and I was a captain at the time. Because Viet Nam was well underway, and in, I wore two hats at the time. I was head of what they call the Loran Project Program. Loran is a long-range aid to navigation electronics, and we built Loran stations all over the world for the armed forces. And the, the Air Force had requirement for a very accurate electronic aid to navigation in Southeast Asia in Viet Nam. And they came to us, the Coast Guard, and we said we could do it, and they sent me there. And I had a construction detachment, and we built three stations and a monitor station in a period of seven months, and got it all on the air and saved a lot of air force and navy flyers' lives, I guess. It gave me a reputation of organization, I guess. And, for some reason, early they picked me up as a, let me explain. The Coast Guard has a board every year to select flag officers from captains in certain zones, and when my class came up for the zone, within the zone, I was picked, as were three, four other classmates of mine. I think I was very fortunate. I was picked as a rear admiral, and I was then assigned as a rear commander in the eleventh Coast Guard district in Long Beach here in California. And then the commandant came out on the trip, Admiral Smith, and he said, "We need you as the Chief of Staff," which is the manager of the Coast Guard. So I was transferred to Washington as the Chief of Staff, and that's a job for two years. At the end of the, as the two years approached, Admiral Smith was about to retire, and they had great difficulty in finding a replacement for him, and they picked Admiral Chester Bender, who was a friend of mine who had been stationed in San Francisco. Chet and I had known each other, he was two years ahead of me at the Academy, we had known each other for years, of course, and we were quite friendly. Chet looked over the list of rear admirals, and he called me and said that, well, there is a long story to this. I'd probably better not tell it. Anyway, he said that he wanted me to stay with him for the next four years, and so I did. I became the vice commandant.

MOORE: Were your parents, either of your parents alive to see you become . . .

SARGENT: Only my dad.

MOORE: Did your mother have any indication you would . . .

SARGENT: No, because Mother was extremely ill in 1943. See, she died in 1943, and I was the engineer on the Dwayne at the time. And as she was dying I, the day she died, the day after she died, the ship sailed for North Africa.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SARGENT: . . . the funeral, my wife took care of everything.

MOORE: When did you meet your wife? You haven't mentioned anything yet about getting married?

SARGENT: I met her my last year at the Academy. I was skating on the pond at Connecticut College, and I saw this charming lady, so I decided I'd like to meet her. And, of course, in those days, you know, you had to be introduced. So I think about the only way to get introduced was to knock her down, which I did. I backed into her, she fell over, and I picked her up, and I said, "I'm Tom Sargent." (he laughs) And we never dated anybody after that.

MOORE: (she laughs) Is she, what is her, is she a first generation immigrant?

SARGENT: Oh, her family has been over here for years. Her grandfather was German, and was born in Germany, but her mother's family are English, and they've been over here for years.

MOORE: And, so she's from the east?

SARGENT: Yeah, she's from New London. Uh-huh.

MOORE: And did you have children, then?

SARGENT: Yes, we have three children.

MOORE: Name the children.

SARGENT: There's Thomas Reese Sargent IV. (he laughs) Carl David Sargent and our daughter, Diane Elizabeth Ryan.

MOORE: All right. When you look back on your life now, do you think your father ever had misgivings, or was happy, or how did he feel about coming to this country?

SARGENT: Oh, Dad went back to England in 19, uh, let's see, '78, for the first time. Uh, when he left, when he told me he was going I said, "Dad, when you go, make sure you have reservations in hotels and things like that in

London." Because he wanted to go to London, and he also wanted to see his sister, my aunt Nellie, down in Exmouth. And he said, "Well, I'm going to Exmouth, then I'm going to London." I said, "Before you go to London, be sure you get yourself a hotel reservation." And he said, "Tom, I'm a native!" I said, "Okay, Dad." (he laughs) I never argued with my father. Anyway, he went, he had a delightful visit with his sister, and then he went to London to see the neighborhood, and he had a terrible time. He couldn't, London was crowded, you couldn't keep a hotel reservation longer than a day at a time, and so he finally, he was going to stay over there for a month, but at the end of, I guess, two months. At the end of a month, he packed up and came back home. He arrived in Washington, and I didn't know he was coming back. I hadn't heard from him. I assumed that he was still with Aunt Nellie, and I got a call from a taxi driver. I lived in Wheaton, Maryland at the time in a townhouse. The taxi driver says, "I've got your father here. I can't find your house." And so I told him how to get to the house, and I, when the taxi arrived I went out, I paid the taxi driver. I said, "Dad, what happened?" He said, "Don't talk to me until I get in." And he walked in the house. (he laughs) He was very, very disappointed with England at the time. It had changed so tremendously. It should have, from 1923 to 1970, I mean, '68, 1968. And I said, "Well, what happened?" And he told me about London, and he said, "I finally decided I wanted to go back home. Home is where I belong, here in the United States." He was just delighted he was here.

MOORE: So how do you view your immigration, then, in your life?

SARGENT: How do I what?

MOORE: How do you look at your immigration then, the decision your parents made?

SARGENT: Oh, I think it was the best thing in the world that ever happened to me. I owe everything I have to this country and the Coast Guard. It's a tremendous country. I just hope that we can keep it that way and not destroy it the way some people seem to be doing. This is a fantastic country. The Constitution has lasted now for over two hundred years, and it's as good as the day it was written, and I just hope that people realize that.

MOORE: I'd like to thank you on behalf of the Ellis Island Project for helping us with your personal history, and we'll send you a copy of this in the late summer or early fall. This is Kate Moore signing off on January 25, 1994 with the Ellis Island Oral History Project.