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LARRY FLOYD BRISKE

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INTERVIEWER: KATE MOORE

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EMPLOYMENT: COAST GUARD

YEARS: 1951-1952 or 1954

MOORE: Good afternoon. This is Kate Moore.

BRISKE: Good afternoon.

MOORE: From the National Park Service. And today is the twentieth seventh of January, 1994.

BRISKE: You're right.

MOORE: And I'm in Poway at the home of Larry F. Briske who was in the Coast Guard at Ellis Island in the 1950's

BRISKE: Mmm.

MOORE: Why don't you begin by giving us your full name and date of birth please.

BRISKE: Larry Floyd Briske. I was born thirteen November of 1931.

MOORE: And where were you born?

BRISKE: Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

MOORE: And uh, would you tell us, in what capacity you were at Ellis Island and when, exact dates?

BRISKE: I was in the Coast Guard. And I, I enlisted in the Coast Guard in-n December of 1951. And uh, left uh, the Coast Guard in December 1954. And uh, I was there in the early-early part of, of, of the 50's. I think uh, '51, '52 probably would uh, would say it.

MOORE: And in the Coast Guard, what were you responsible for?

BRISKE: I was a gunnersman. I took care of, of pistols and things like that. And I ride guns in case we ever needed them. Used to guard piers, you know. Things like that. Piers that they, where they were shipping flammable things or something that had to be, had to be careful that didn't uh, er, the steamer didn't smoke or anything like that, we'd do.

MOORE: And where did you live on Ellis Island?

BRISKE: I lived in the uh, in the hospital on the other side of the immigration building. There was, there was a quarter between. And when the, when we went in, we'd go over to the their. And we'd pull the, when the freight boat pulled up, we'd go to the left where our. The old hospital is where we stayed.

MOORE: And um, could you describe the condition of the hospital and describe the hospital for us in any term, where you lived?

BRISKE: Well. Er, I recollect the hospital was pretty condition. Er. We stayed there. We kept it clean. I don't remember too much about it except that we stayed in the rooms. And um, I remember I was in a room with uh, with four people. And I know, m-my friend was uh, my best friend at that time, was in a room with seven or eight people. And some were, had, were in rooms that were, you know, smaller amount of people. And I remember we had uh, the mess hall was in the basement at, er, in in a big room which I assume, I think, was the uh, the cafeteria at the time the hospital was open. And we had everything. We had dry cleaning and everything down-downstairs and uh, I stay at the second floor. And there were, were guys up on the third floor, second flo-, third floor were. I stay on the, the second. The guys on the first floor. I don't remember if we had three floors or not, I should.

MOORE: And what about the condition of the building in general? In terms of plaster or an-and?

BRISKE: Oh, there were, there were places were the plaster was looser or coming down, you know. There was a, a nothing that an-any danger to us, things like that. But there was, you know, it was an old place.

MOORE: And, do you see why. Well at that time, may I ask this, was Ellis Island an operation?

BRISKE: The immigration part? No. It was not. It was closed down.

MOORE: And the reason why you were in the hospital was because that was no longer in use? Is that true?

BRISKE: That's right. Th-the Coast Guard was using it to berth, the coast guardsmen who uh, did the pier guarding, things like that. We stayed in there.

MOORE: Was there any indication from the building uh, grounds and the condition of the grounds, why Ellis Island would have closed?

BRISKE: No, I don't think so. I, I, I uh, I think that the, the, I think that the fact that the uh, it was a hospital and it was inconvenience as far the military manner of things, I think is probably why they moved to uh, to another place after a while. Ah.

MOORE: What about... where you able to see Ellis Island? It was closed at that time with the immigration part?

BRISKE: Mmm.

MOORE: You were, were you permitted to go then?

BRISKE: No, we were from (laughs). We were prohibited from going over there. But we did. We would sneak over there. Ah. An-and take a look at the place. I meant, I, my memory of uh uh of this, brings forth a huge big hall. So we went in there, huge big hall. And that was pretty, was empty. And it was, there wasn't any tables or anything in there. Um. But uh, I suppose that there had been. They put them away. But it was a big. I 'member seeing the big hall. And I 'member um, uh, kind of a uh, uh, going around to other places the island looking. We didn't get too many buildings. We didn't go in any. Most of the buildings were locked. Couldn't get into them.

MOORE: And what was your

BRISKE: (mumbles)

MOORE: Impression of the place in terms of conditions?

BRISKE: Um well. It was a, uh, i-it was clean. And uh, it was old. I never really you know. It was eerie. 'Cause of, when you're, when you're twenty years old, twenty one years old and you know about th-the immigration policies and things that are happening and people are coming in and the stories you're told and everything. You don't have to, walk in that, that big hall, I mean you just, you were just in awe.

MOORE: Did you ever hear any stories about Ellis Island?

BRISKE: Not, not while I was there. No.

MOORE: But since then, you've told people you were stationed there, have they told you?

BRISKE: Oh yeah, I, I would I w-was stationed there.

MOORE: And were most of the things that people told you, when you told them that you were there, were they? What kind of stories did they tell you?

BRISKE: N-nothing. Hardly anything anymore. I just uh, uh... I have never come across anybody around here th-that says they went through Ellis Island as an immigrant. Never have.

MOORE: So they'd to be. Come through before 1950...

BRISKE: Maybe '51 yeah.

MOORE: '1. Right.

BRISKE: Yeah.

MOORE: And what did the Coast Guard use the, elaborate a little more on the, on the dock by, guarding that you did and why. And, an-and also with the arms.

BRISKE: Well, th-the piers uh in the, in New York, New York Harbor, they were piers that had, that had uh, uh.... uh, boxes and crates and things that they shipped out or took in th-that had like explosive or things th-that we had to be careful for, so you wouldn't blow up the pier. And so we uh, uh, the Coast Guard was responsible for guarding the this thing with a pistol on it. An-and we'd, we'd get into a 83 footer and uh, they would take us over to these different piers and we'd hop on and we'd stand at the uh, entrance to pier and check IDs of people coming on because of sabotage, you know. And uh, and we would walk the pier itself to make sure the uh, the [not understood] weren't smoking. And uh, if they were smoking, we'd report them. And uh, uh, just, just for general safety's sake.

MOORE: And was the location of Ellis Island particularly good for, for keep, I mean, comment on the location. Why do you think it was used for Ellis Island itself? And why was it good for that purpose?

BRISKE: Hmm. I think they used Ellis Island, just, just thinking back because, because it was the only place they had to go, right then. I think they were thinking of moving into, into a pier uh, uh, in New York itself, you know Manhattan Island itself. And then, as you know, they mentioned that you went to, what's it not, what used to be Governors' Island. And I think that,

there, those were the long reach plans. B-but in the meantime, all they had, was they closed down Ellis Island to stay.

MOORE: Wh-what was going to be moved to Governors' Island?

BRISKE: The Coast Guard.

MOORE: What about in terms of immigration, do you see why Ellis Island was chosen? In terms of its isolation?

BRISKE: Oh it. It was, yeah, because it, it was surrounded by water. And like you say, it was isolated. And uh, and uh, I can see why they would put people in there wh-when they first came in. It was an ideal spot. Uh.

MOORE: What about the fleet of, did you used to be. Right before it was closed, there still were the, a fleet of boats that used to take people from the big liners to the islands. Sort of tug boats. People describe a fleet run by, I don't really know if it was the Coast Guard, who it was run by.

BRISKE: Never, never saw that, no.

MOORE: Never saw that?

BRISKE: No. The only boat we had was the, was the ferry boat. It went down to Battery an-and back to Ellis Island. Back and forth, it took us there. Took the men off of Liberty, and we'd go up. We still had our 83 footers of course. But that's the only boats that were there. Coming in there. There's only one of them too. And uh, it was scary because it was very foggy. And at night, that old thing would creak and creak, you know. And the 'specially in the, in, in the uh, in the bad weather. And sometimes you would miss the, the, the slip, you know. And it's a. And sometimes the

last boat was the one o'clock and if you uh, didn't make it, we slipped down the boat that uh, on it... Sometimes at the uh, down the Battery and... So if it was too foggy, we'd have to stay at the Battery, you know. It's a, some stories about that boat, I'll tell ya. But that was the only thing we had, that ferry going back and forth.

MOORE: Did any of the people with whom you worked, uh... did they, were they stay at Ellis Island working before that? When Ellis Island was an immigration center?

BRISKE: That I, I, I would say that I...

MOORE: [interposed] Did you know

BRISKE: Probably so.

MOORE: anyone?

BRISKE: No, I didn't know anybody that we didn't uh. No.

MOORE: So the transition from Ellis Island, going from immigration to a military post, through a Coast Guard post

BRISKE: Mmm.

MOORE: Did anybody comment on that to you?

BRISKE: No, I never heard anything, stories about that. Never.

MOORE: Um. So. Tell us a little bit. You were there from 1950 to 1950...

BRISKE: 1951, I went on, went into the Coast Guard. December. So I was there in 1952 sometime. The exact month, I don't remember. '52. And I was there for about a year.

MOORE: Until.

BRISKE: Probably in uh, '53 or early '54. I left the Coast Guard in uh. At the end of '54. But uh, I was stationed in Sandy Hook, I, I think right there at the end there though. Yeah that. Summer times, I used to go up to uh, I was sent off to Cape May, New Jersey. 'Cause I was a gunnersman, walk on the rifle range. And it's winter, fall and winter, we'd come back and uh. When it wasn't firing season, then I'd work on Ellis Island.

MOORE: And where did you go after that? You're now a reverend, so you're...

BRISKE: Well when I got out of the Coast Guard, I, I finished college. And then uh...

MOORE: Where?

BRISKE: Uh, at, at um, Wiscon- University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. And then work for, for uh, a while. Then went in the seminary eventually.

MOORE: And you're now in what capacity?

BRISKE: I'm in, I'm Roman Catholic priest now.

MOORE: Right. Of a parish here?

BRISKE: Well I work at St. Michael's Parish here in Poway.

MOORE: And uh, have you ever gone back to Ellis Island?

BRISKE: Ah... one time I did. But it was, it was a long part time ago. It was, it was. Nobody was there anymore. I went back uh... again just when they opened it up. When they had renovated the whole thing. You know. And you could go in there and look around. And it was, it was uh. It was nice.

MOORE: When was that? What year?

BRISKE: Oh I don't remember that at all. Couldn't say.

MOORE: How many years ago? Roughly. Say a ballpark. What year?

BRISKE: Oh, that must be... f-, maybe uh... Let's see, maybe, maybe ten years. Ten years ago. Twelve years ago. When I was in the Navy. I was a Navy chaplain for, for twenty four years. Twenty five years.

MOORE: Why did you go back?

BRISKE: Because I was in the area and so I went to uh... When I went back, I went to um... Staten Island where I was first there at the base of that, at the foot of Staten Island where the ferry docked and. That, that was closed up. Just for old time's sake, seems like a, remember what I could see and.

MOORE: What was different?

BRISKE: It was. It was dead. (laughs) It was uh, Ellis Island. Nobody there. There were visitors there, you know, and you could, you could uh, uh... You could uh. No, there weren't any visitors there. No, you know what I'm thinking of. I'm thinking of we went there uh... we got a ride on a boat to go back there, but uh... uh, it was closed. There wasn't anybody there.

There, there wasn't that, th-, uh, the uh, the ferry was in the slip up there. They weren't running that ferry anymore. Right.

MOORE: But you haven't been, have you been back since the?

BRISKE: No.

MOORE: It's been renovated?

BRISKE: No. No, I'm thinking about the renovation. You know, I was thinking of, I was thinking of Statue of Liberty. And how's it's

MOORE: [interposed] Yeah.

BRISKE: That's what I was thinking about. No, not Ellis Island. [inaudible mumbling]

MOORE: Because it would be interesting if you go back now to see the difference in the museum

BRISKE: [interposed] Well I'd love to. That would be, that was uh... They got a museum there now?

MOORE: Yes. Yeah.

BRISKE: Now, it'd be fun to go back there.

MOORE: And see the... Now, how did the... archives get a hold of you? (pause)

BRISKE: Well I think the uh... they got a hold of a guy that was my best friend up there at the time. Who now lives in... in um... Pennsylvania, right outside

of Harrisburg. And I think he mentioned me 'cause we were together up there. We used to go, I had a girl in uh... in, in Harrisburg. And weekends, we'd use to go up to... to Harrisburg. And and go out, you know.

MOORE: And what the name of your friend? Just in case I can't find it.

BRISKE: Um, Will Gregory, William Gregory. F. William Gregory.

MOORE: And um, he mentioned that you worked there during the

BRISKE: [interposed] Yeah. Yeah, we were together there at that time.

MOORE: Is there anything else you can say about uh... about this that you remember? Any stories? Or anything about the immigration time?

BRISKE: Not about immigration.

MOORE: But. Or give us one about the. You started smiling. Give us one about the time that you worked there.

BRISKE: Well. Eh. The guys used to do some awful things there, you know. We used to uh. I 'member when um... when I, I was the gunnersman. I had charge of the little bit of room where we kept the pistols and things there like. And I had the night watch for something that wa-, that wasn't for the guns, it was for something.

MOORE: Mmm.

BRISKE: And what, um... And um, we'd use to, we'd use to congregate in the uh, in the room where the uh... uh, telephone switch board was. It was quite a

large room. We'd use to read the paper, sit and drink coffee and. I 'member one of the guys was reading the paper, and he said "Hey, I got an idea. Remember the soap play." Ah, there was an add in the paper for a guy that wanted to sell his boat. That was about two in the morning. And so, they got. (laughs) Got on the phone and called this guy at two in the morning. Th-they'd have to have the boat very fast. And they'd pay him like fif-fifty precent more than what he was asking if he'd, if he'd come down and bring the boat down. And uh... so. (laughs) We stood there with binoculars and watch this guy with the boat circle around, 'round, not with a battery, you know. I'm like, no way to. (both laugh) It's nasty you know, but, you know, th-the sailors will do a lot of things like that to keep themselves occupied. And then, they'd use to tricks like that. And the nights would go fast when you had night duty and times like that. Now Bill Gregory was um... worked on what we talked about, worked in the uh... he worked on the switch board. And he also worked in the, in the Coast Guard Exchange. And uh... so he would remember that story too. Uh... Those are just things, you know. And sailors will be sailors.

MOORE: You have another one?

BRISKE: No. I don't remember any more right now.

MOORE: (laughs)

BRISKE: Probably after you leave, I'll probably remember some more, but.

MOORE: Well I'd like to thank you on behalf of Ellis Island Oral Project.

BRISKE: Ah. I wish I could tell you more. It's a... I enjoyed the time there. And uh... And uh... I could, I wish there was more I could tell you about the place.

MOORE: Well we appreciate it anyway.

BRISKE: Okay.

MOORE: And this Kate Moore signing off from Poway, California on January 27th,
1994.