**Paul:** Good morning, this is Paul Secrest for the National Park service. Today is Wednesday, May 18th 1994. I'm at the Ellis Island recording studio with two former coast guardsmen who were stationed here at Ellis Island.

I'm here with Oval Williams who was here between June and September of 1943 and I'm here with Chester Acaley, who was here from April of 1944 to August of 1945 and had the distinction of playing in the band here in Ellis Island, anyway gentlemen welcome.

Can we begin? Chet why don't you give me your birth date please.

**Chet:** May 20th, 1925.

**Paul:** Well and happy birthday almost.

**Chet:** Thank you.

**Paul:** Oval?

**Oval:** Yes.

**Paul:** What’s your birthday please?

**Oval:** September the 6th 1920.

**Paul:** And Oval, can you just tell me where you were born and a little bit about your background?

**Oval:** Yes, they tell me I was born that date, September 6th. In Virginia, the lower Northern Neck in the Northumberland County. My mother's doctor was a doctor Hudnall and his wife was a nurse and she named me.

She suggested the name Oval and mother said, "That’s a pretty name and that’s what we'll call him." So that’s where the name came from Lower Northern Neck is Chesapeake Bay and Burtons river intersection.

**Paul:** Chet can I-- not Chet, Oval. Well, I'm still talking to you, can you just tell me a little bit about your parent’s background please?

**Oval:** My mother did a little school teaching before she was married. My dad was a waterman, fisherman and that was his livelihood all his life.

He was a fish boat captain, the steamer would stay probably a week, leave Reedville and come the Jersey and New York sound for fish and transport them back to Reedville where they were processed for the oil and especially the oil and then the body of the fish went into fish crap which was made into dairy feeds and fertilizers, things of that sort but he died at an early age, in 62'. Mother lived to be about 88, she never remarried.

I was one of five children, the third one in line. The oldest brother died quite a few years ago, blood clot. He broke his leg and then in hospital a couple of weeks and doing fine and then blood clot slipped and took his life.

A sister, just younger than I was, was undergoing treatment for cancer, taking chemotherapy and she had been in and had one series of treatments and went home between the treatments and at that time she developed phlebitis and when she went back to the hospital, she had a blood clot, slipped and we think that saved her from many years of suffering by taking her life at that time.

**Paul:** Chet, may I ask you the same sorts of questions? Where were you born exactly?

**Chet:** I was born in Minersville Pennsylvania and I was in music all the time, I played violin for a contest with Rubinoff, I don't know if you remember Rubinoff. He was great violinist, played in the Eddie Conner show and at the--

**Paul:** You might want to put your papers down because it will pick it up on mic.

**Chet:** In second grade I won the loving cup for violin and I wanted to be a great violinist like he was and then all through high school I was active in the band in the orchestra, baseball and basketball.

**Paul:** While continuing your music and doing the athletics.

**Chet:** Yes and then Jack Torick who was in one of the weekly logs, we decided we were going to join the coast guard and we joined before we graduated. We went to boot camp together at Manhattan Beach, we were assigned to a ship together, we were in the hospital for the same ailment together, then came to Ellis Island to be reassigned and we both heard our names over the PA system and rest our auditions for the band.

So we both auditioned and both made the Ellis Island band and there were about 30 members. Most of them were before entering the service were with the big dance bands, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey and so on.

I was young 17, I learnt more than I ever learnt when I went to college and became a music teacher from these men because they were such excellent musicians and I was stationed here for that length of time and we used to play a lot of band rallies, Tars and Spurs. We were with Victor Mature and Cesar Romero and every Sunday at 4 to 4:30 we would play in W-N-E-W, every Sunday and then we had national broadcast and occasionally, about once a month we played in W-O-O-R and that went nationally.

**Paul:** You might be interested in knowing this, Cesar Romero when he was in the military was sick in the public health service hospital here at Ellis Island [chuckle].

**Chet:** I played ping pong with Cesar, I realized though.

**Paul:** When you were here?

**Chet:** Yeah.

**Paul:** Yeah.

**Chet:** And he was on tour, he and Mature with our band.

**Paul:** Can you back up just a little bit? I just wanted a little bit of family background on you, your parents, a little bit about them.

**Chet:** Well, my mother was musical, played piano. I don't think there's any tune you couldn't hum and she couldn't play. My dad was a barber, my mother died at 54 and my dad died at 68 and I still miss them.

**Paul:** And your friend Jack, how do you spell his last name?

**Chet:** T- O- R- I -C-K, he's been dead 20- 25 years. He also became a music teacher in New Jersey.

**Paul:** That’s interesting. Oval, Chet told us a little bit about he got into the coast guard, can you do the same for us please?

**Oval:** Yes, I was working in Richmond, at General Motors parts department and the manager- I think it was his sister that was on the draft board and so when he told me about that and with that connection, I kept in touch with her as to when my number was coming up for the draft and I didn't want the army by no means and since I was familiar with the water, I said, "I'm going not in the navy but I'm going to take the coast guard," and she told me my number was about to come up and with that I went to Norfolk in Portsmouth.

And a lot of the men, young men from Reedville in that area were going in the coast guard at that time, so I went down and that’s when I joined and I was assigned immediately to 50- foot harbor, patrol the boat and I don't understand. I did not have boot camp, went to ride the boat and a couple open and one for all I knew passionate before that and all of the boats in the area had people from Reedville and Kilmarnock, the town where I'm from and so we stayed there and then I was discharged in November.

This was in May or June and discharged on the 18th. I think was November and re-enlisted the next day. Why? I never could find out, I don't know but anyway my discharge now gives enlisted in November.

**Paul:** What year?

**Oval:** Of 42'.

**Paul:** 42'.

**Oval:** Then signed up for this Quartermaster Sigmund school and there was the summer of 43' that I don't know how many were here 35- 40 in the class and being the small town, Reedville fishing community and there had been licensed steam boat captain for the Atlantic ocean, Atlantic seaboard man to Florida I wanted that experience. So I trained and I accepted then took coast guard really because of his license that he always had on his dresser when he was at home.

**Paul:** Chet, let me ask you because this was your first coast guard station, I mean you went into the coast guard and came to Ellis Island, am I to understand that correctly?

**Chet:** No, I went to Sound school at the academy US in London.

**Paul:** I see from there came here.

**Chet:** And was assigned up.

**Paul:** I was wondering if you can describe for me, your first day here? What happened when you arrived here at the very first day? What was the procedure to introduce you to the island and that sort of thing?

**Chet:** Oh, we got off the ferry and [chuckle] I was sort of confused. Torick was with me, the two of us and so when we saw these barracks and we were assigned two beds in the barracks and then we were waiting for assignment to a ship because we had been soundmen, having the year off because of music, we were sent to sound school.

**Paul:** What is sound school exactly?

**Chet:** That was you were a soundmen and listened to the pains and learning the different pitches of what was the school of fish, what was the submarine and that type of thing. It was a very important job, if you didn't report it correctly. You could have been hit by a submarine missile, so it was an important job.

**Paul:** Did you continue doing that work when you were here, after school?

**Chet:** No.

**Paul:** No.

**Chet:** No, I was awaiting assignment and then I heard about the- over the PA system to report to- I forget where it was anymore and then we were auditioned and got into the band.

**Paul:** Do you remember what you played for the audition?

**Chet:** Little bit of *Flight of the Bumblebee* I remember then and I played on the violin, I played *Shades* and then both of us, Torick was trombone and I was trumpet and violin and he was trombone and violin. So then we had added a string Saxon to the group. The singer was Bob Norman who was a former big band vocalist and that was if we were both in awe with all the musicians, the top musicians.

**Paul:** Was your function as the band to provide music for the coast guardsmen who were here?

**Chet:** For dances here, they would bring in ships and girls from USO and from this group or that group and had weekly dances, we had weekly logs that have a number of copies here and there was always comment about the shark shenanigans which was the band and I mentioned a number of times in there. We were always together they called me Nip and they called Torick Tuck, Nip and Tuck [chuckle] and it’s mentioned in this.

Then we played the numerous praise, we played at Radio City, in front of radio city, you know with the statues and so on are.

We'd play there and we'd play a lot of band rallies and right before we came on in W-N-E-W, there used to be usually a name band Louis Prima was quite who was quite a bit. So we got to know them, Duke Ellington.

**Paul:** I'm interested in the fact that you were taken off the island and played it at various functions in New York and that sort of thing.

**Chet:** We had what we call van men, they were the once who would take the equipment off and then there were trucks to take our equipment and each week for W-N-E-W or whatever we were playing, they would set up the stands, have everything ready and then when we got there we were ready to play. Many a nights I spend on the benches because the last ferry had left before we were able to get back.

**Paul:** I’m sure like a 10:30 ferry or something, it was quite early.

**Chet:** 10 or 11 I don't know.

**Paul:** 11.

**Chet:** I believe at that time but we played quite a bit. The ships dances in the summer were cancelled because it was too hot where we had to dance.

**Paul:** Where did they have the dances here?

**Chet:** It was a large room off of- I can picture it and I have pictures here of it but from the location of things here, I knew where I was from the--

**Paul:** Was there a stage in the room or?

**Chet:** The band shack was in the back and facing the drill field and we used to play for drilling and also then the trumpet players played to get everybody up in the morning, the Revelry and then they used to bring out the prisoners with their heads shaved and a big P in the back and they would stand while we played taps.

**Paul:** Can you talk to me and maybe both of you can join in on this about the prisoners, who were these prisoner? No, Chet do you know who these [crosstalk 00:15:56].

**Chet:** These prisoners were our own coast guardsmen and they were Smart Alex like through our tours was one of the commands and one fellow threw it out while he was head shaven and they had to carry with their arms swollen and had a big P on them and they were in a separate area and then they would come out call us at night to bring down the collars.

**Oval:** Would that be like serving time in the brig?

**Chet:** Yes, that was the sort of thing.

**Paul:** Was there a brig on the island?

**Oval:** There was a brig.

**Paul:** Was there an actual jail on the island?

**Chet:** There must have actually been a brig on it [chuckle]. I was never in it [laughter] but they were there when we played because the trumpet players had assignments that we were certain times and especially if it hit on our weekend, we never really had a weekend off because every Sunday all year long we played on Sunday afternoon but then you would have that duty Friday or Saturday and Sunday.

So that after the broadcast, you got back in the ferry and come back and played and every trumpet player had his certain weekends that we had to go for those and so a lot of times you didn't have any time off.

**Paul:** Yeah, it sounds like you know you're kept pretty busy.

**Chet:** And there was a lot of- during the day we would practice. We had two of our own composer and arrangers. One was Artie Zazmar who was also the director, played with the metropolitan opera or orchestra.

**Paul:** Can you spell Zazmar please?

**Chet:** Z-A-Z-M-A-R and I have pictures here of him and the background on him and an excellent musician but we had our own arrangements, they were not the standard arrangements. They were made especially for the Ellis Island band.

I also have the scripts, two scripts from W-N-E-W broadcast and where we would play pam-pam- pa-pa-pa-pa-pam and then bring it down and they would announce, every week they had some hero of some type on and he would be interviewed and then we would play numbers in between for that half hour.

**Paul:** Wow, that’s really interesting, we'll have to take a look at that after the interview is over. Oval, I want to ask you to describe for me Sigmund master school. What was it that you learnt and what were you doing?

**Oval:** Semaphore.

**Paul:** And that’s what you came here to do? This is what they sent you here--

**Oval:** Sent here to learn semaphore and Morse cord.

**Paul:** Can you explain to the listeners what semaphore is?

**Oval:** It’s a hole in two flags, one in each hand and you have your positions that spell out the alphabet, A through Z and you can go through it very fast, just as fast as you can spell a name, you just spell it out letter by letter.

**Paul:** [crosstalk 00:19:14] still in use by the coast guard at this time?

**Oval:** Yes and you would spell out. It was no abbreviation, you didn't abbreviate like a sonographer would abbreviate when you were talking to her because she didn't have time to write it all, every word but--

**Chet:** This you also got in boot camp, not as intense.

**Paul:** You sort of got the introduction in boot camp and then you got the polishing here in the school.

**Oval:** Probably so.

**Paul:**  Can you describe for me what the process was? How did they teach you to do this?

**Oval:** They gave you instructions while you had your position for each letter and you just had to do it by practice. You made your A and you learnt to make the A and then you learnt to make the B and then the C and then right on down and then you would spell out A-B-C or spell the word T-H-E or whatever you wanted to spell and you just learnt to practice and you practiced spelling your sentence.

**Paul:** Was there a classroom where you learnt this or did you do it outside?

**Oval:** You got in the classroom instructions yes, and then you did the afternoon, get out on the ferry dock and one get on one side and one on the other and you couldn't hear each other and you had to talk. You talked to each other via using your semaphore flags.

**Chet:** That’s why we were practicing, we practice all day long and he was practicing too.

**Oval:** We were practicing and learning to do it and then in the classroom we had the Morse code and little light and somebody would use the Morse code and you would read it.

**Paul:** Now how was that done? Was that also done in the classroom, was there a light on the wall somewhere?

**Oval:** There was a light yes, and he would take the light and spell it or a paragraph. Pick up a book and a word and open it and give a paragraph and you had to write it out and then once you learnt your dots and dashes, every letter had a dot and dash or combination of those, your Morse code then soon he graded you.

He would know- the instructor how you were progressing by how many words did you get out of that paragraph? How many did you miss? Sometimes he'd be going faster than others. He started off slow of course and then progressed, increased his speed because--

**Paul:** Well, and of course this is war time, was the intention to get you educated enough so that they can send overseas?

**Oval:** To send you a board ship and wherever you may go, that’s correct like--

**Paul:** What was harder, semaphore or Morse code for you?

**Oval:** Both of them.

**Paul:** It’s tricky. You have to think of a lot.

**Oval:** I can't answer your question because I don't know. They were both hard but once you get it then it’s very easy. after you get it, it just comes natural and we didn't use semaphore [unclear 00:22:54] too much board ship because you were too far away and the light was right there, you had big lights and you could talk sometimes at night time if you were around somewhere another ship, you could talk to them 25 miles away. Put your light on the cloud and the other who you're talking to would read it off a cloud, ships not insight of each other. You couldn't see it straight line but you could talk to him flashing off of a cloud.

**Paul:** How much time spend during the day was spent on classroom work?

**Oval:** Yeah, that was 50 years ago you know.

**Paul:** Oh you'll remember [laughter].

**Oval:** I don't really know.

**Paul:** Or was it half your day? Was it like once per day?

**Oval:** I think the classroom basically was in the morning and then you had lunch and you had a little time off at that time. Maybe we had a couple- an hour or two in the afternoon classroom.

I just can't say, then you go out and you're restricted though not restricted but you had nowhere to go. You didn't have the liberty. You didn't go to Manhattan only on weekends. You stayed here the 24 hours a day five days a week.

**Paul:** If you didn't have to play in the band.

**Oval:** If you didn't [laughter]. I don't recall there being a band here at that time but it could have been but I don't remember one.

**Chet:** He was different.

**Paul:** By chance, you know the fact that I have you two men together today is interesting because it does sort of show that even though the coast guard is a small group here on the island that there many different facets to the coast guard that didn't necessarily interact.

**Oval:** I think that’s right.

**Paul:** Oval let me ask you one more question. Can you describe where you stayed? What the dormitory looked like?

**Oval:** No, I cannot. I know it was a dormitory room, the bunks were two bunks high but how much time I spent there, and I can't answer you--

**Chet:** It was a large room.

**Oval:** It was a large room. We were all in this one room.

**Chet:** One room.

**Paul:** All the coast guardsmen stayed in one dormitory room.

**Oval:** This is the class that I was in, we were in one room. That was the only ones in that room was this class.

**Paul:** And Chet you remember there being everybody--

**Chet:** I remember everyone waiting for reassignment.

**Paul:** Is that sort of what Ellis Island was? Sort of just a holding tank until you were--

**Chet:** Receiving station, Ellis Island receiving station.

**Paul:** Or to learn something to then go on.

**Oval:** They had this class quartermaster Sigmund School.

**Paul:** Chet can you describe for me the dormitory, just sort of maybe the layout of it and--?

**Chet:** It was big and we had inspection every Saturday.

**Paul:** What did inspection entail?

**Chet:** They came around and looked for clean laundry, everything had to be clean and--

**Oval:** In place.

**Chet:** You had to be that they could drop a coin on there and sometimes white glove inspections. So you made sure that your bed was in order and this was done weekly on a Saturday, every Saturday.

**Paul:** And how many men would be staying in this one room do you think?

**Chet:** Oh, I’d say 100 in there. It was the biggest room on the island.

**Paul:** And for you it was smaller from what you remember?

**Oval:** It wasn't that big, no. It was just a class and I don't know how many was in the class, 25- 30 and our class was in that one room and that was all that was in there.

**Chet:** That was separate from [crosstalk 00:27:03].

**Oval:** Our instructor had other quarters. He was not in the barracks with us.

**Paul:** Do you remember the name of your instructor? He’s going to look it up on the--

**Oval:** The instructor was- just a second, I'll see if I can find him here. Hebbel H-E- B- B- E- L junior, initial C.E.

**Paul:** What do you remember about him as a person?

**Oval:** He was very nice, he was a first class. I don't know whether he was Sigmund or quartermaster, I believe he was quarter master and then chief quartermaster was- if I'm find his name.

**Paul:** Mr. Williams is looking on a photograph [laughter]. I'm just going to say for the sake of the tape.

**Oval:** Oh, I can't pick him up.

**Paul:** Well, that’s alright. I was just wondering if I could get some sense of the various people that might have stuck out in your mind and certainly an instructor would have been someone that would have struck out in your mind.

**Oval:** I should be able to give it to you and I'll say it here in a minute but I can't- chief instructor Crockett C-R-O-C-K-E-T-T and he was very nice but Hebbel- he turned things over to Hebbel quite often and Hebbel was I think first class quartermaster and he was real good.

**Paul:** And he was actually leading the class from time.

**Oval:** But Crockett was in charge and he was chief with harsh marks.

**Paul:** How many people were in the semaphore class do you think? 30 did you say?

**Oval:** Looking at that picture say about 30.

**Paul:** We're going to pause just for a second so that Kevin can flip over all the tapes and then we'll begin on side two and I've lots more questions to ask you, so hang on just a second.

**Oval:** Okay.

**Paul:** Right, we're beginning side two with Oval Williams and Chet Acaley. Chet, you obviously wore a uniform of some sort.

**Chet:** That’s right.

**Paul:** Can you describe it for me what it was like?

**Chet:** Well, we made sure whenever we made public appearances that the hat was squared. We always wore leggings and white leggings and they had to be spotless.

We had hair inspection before we played, you couldn't have the hair sticking out very long and in that one week then you all go shave it [chuckle].

We had a barber there who was a band boy for the band and he would cut the hair and make sure that it was the length they wanted and also we wore white gloves and even though we were only around 30, everybody played.

They really and like the band boy, one of them was a drum major. They all had a duty of some type whenever there's public appearances and they had their work to do, they were either that or they would play an extra set for symbols so that we didn't have to take one of the drummers because it was the small unit.

I remember playing for Governor Dewey, down in 5th Avenue. We did quite a few parades and they were long parades [chuckle], I have pictures at home that I look at every once in a while and think boy the sound that we got out of that few people.

**Paul:** So you were matching while you were playing?

**Chet:** Oh yeah.

**Paul:** Did you practice matching here on the island?

**Chet:** Yes, we did and--

**Paul:** Where? What was [crosstalk 00:31:06]?

**Chet:** Right behind the band shack there was this large drill field and we all took turns playing the bass drums while the drummers played the snare drums and they had the people who were stationed here out matching and then we'd have occasional, we'd have reviews and it would be in our regular dress uniforms for that. Otherwise we wore the blue shirts and the denim pants around and our hats.

**Paul:** Oval, do you remember the use of the drill field at all? Were you ever involved having to go--?

**Oval:** No, we didn't have drills.

**Paul:** You didn't have any kind of--?

**Oval:** No drills and I don't recall that we having Saturday morning inspections but maybe we did. We were kind of different.

**Paul:** Separate.

**Oval:** Separate from all the rest of the island. We were just here for classroom, school.

**Paul:** To learn your stuff and go [chuckle].

**Oval:** Learn our stuff and go and about 3 months we were here.

**Paul:** Let me ask both of you men and I'll start with Oval because we're talking with him. What did you do for fun? Now you went to New York probably upon occasions but what did you do? What was offered?

**Oval:** The first thing when you're liberty started Saturday.

**Paul:** At what time?

**Oval:** Around noon, it could have been 1 O'clock. I'm not positive but to catch the ferry and the first place was the USO. At the USO they would give us discount tickets for hotels, you had to have a room for the night, that was the first thing and then they'd give you discount tickets to various broadways shows.

I thoroughly enjoyed going to Broadway shows and then of course you would stop off the bar room get a couple of beers and go dancing at night USO or different places, You meet different people and they'd invite you to, "Oh we're going so and so tonight," "Yes, indeed," anybody invites you always said yes.

**Paul:** Now were you in dressed white or some kind of--?

**Oval:** In our white, dressed white. It was summer time and I guess the dressed blues were in the sea bag but we didn't use those in the summer time everything was white.

**Paul:** So most of the coast guardsmen then would stay overnight when they had the weekend leave?

**Oval:** Saturday night and come back Sunday night.

**Paul:** You had to arrive by a certain time.

**Oval:** Well you caught the last ferry.

**Paul:** So you basically had all day Sunday, you didn't have to be back in like 5 0'clock.

**Oval:** No, had all day Sunday. You had to be here by Monday morning and you had to catch that last ferry. We caught 11- 11:30 or whatever the time it was till you get back.

**Paul:** Now were there entertainments of some sort offered on the island for those who chose not to leave the island? Actually you probably had to play for them [laughter].

**Chet:** Yeah, we played dances and--

**Oval:** I don't recall any.

**Paul:** You don't recall any.

**Oval:** I don't recall any. In our class everybody, now Bob [unclear 00:34:31] I came up with, his home was down there Philly and he went home all weekends, most every weekend and I'll go into that later.

**Paul:** Were there movies Oval here that you recall or anything like that?

**Oval:** No, and not that I don't know.

**Chet:** Yes, there.

**Oval:** Maybe not, we weren't exposed to it. I don't recall seeing a movie here.

**Paul:** I'm wondering if even your weekend pass because you were here with the Sigmund masters school that even you had a little more liberty than maybe just the general Joe who was here stationed. Is that possible? Since it seems like you were somewhat separated.

**Oval:** We had from noon, say noon Saturday until midnight Sunday, go anywhere, do whatever you wanted to.

**Paul:** What about inviting people onto the island. Could you do that?

**Oval:** Well, I didn't know anyone to invite, so I wouldn't. Maybe they could but I wouldn't know because I have no people in this vicinity. Now I did have some cousins down in Jersey Linden but I didn't go down to visit them while I was here that I recall.

**Paul:** Chet, what do you remember about when you had a few [chuckle] free minutes? What did you do for entertainment the time that you were here?

**Chet:** Well, I'd go into the city and get tickets at the Grand central Station a lot for the paramount which had big bands and a lot of the theatres strand they all had big bands and we'd go to the movie and see the big bands or go to musicals or a show on Broadway.

I remember one it was Mae West, it was one of the worst shows I ever saw [laughter] and he had real good seats because there weren't too many people really [laughter]. It didn't last too long but that type of thing and then USO.

**Paul:** Was the USO just as important in your experience as it was in Oval's experience?

**Oval:** That was the first stop.

**Chet:** Yeah.

**Paul:** And you both can chime in with this, can you describe for me what a night at the USO was like?

**Chet:** Oh, there's dancing, there were volunteer girls there we would dance with. They weren't supposed to, I don't think date any of them and there were refreshments and it was just to get to be with other people and sometimes there's special shows you know I remember Martha Raye one time being at one of the shows and we played a number of big U-S-O's in New York. The whole band, the dance band played for that.

**Paul:** I think it’s interesting that the U-S-O is sort of functioning to watch over the military too by offering you discount tickets to hotels and things just kind of keep you out of trouble as best as they could. That’s an interesting part of all this, what if a sailor was picked up for drunkenness, sailor, coast guardsmen, someone in New York? What if there were some misconduct, what would happen?

**Oval:** I don't know, I don't know.

**Chet:** Oh, there were really SPs. they were around all the time.

**Oval:** SPs were everywhere.

**Chet:** And for me I was under age so I didn't drink at all. Some of the other folks in the band after you know we played may have had some but--

**Oval:** I didn't have any problem with drinking but I enjoyed and went to the bar room [laughter] but--

**Paul:** There was no drinking here on the island I assume?

**Chet:** Oh no.

**Oval:** No drinking here but we'd hit the bars and go from bar to bar,

**Chet:** Coca-Cola [laughter]

**Oval:** And have a beer and high balls but always stayed reasonably straight and the SPs didn't bother you unless you were completely out of line. I found that ever where you would go, they were human beings just like everybody else.

**Chet:** They were in Times Square and all around the area.

**Oval:** Unless you were really about to get into trouble or had gotten into trouble, they didn't bother you too much.

**Paul:** Do either of you remember an instance where one of your fellow coast guardsmen got into a lot of trouble?

**Chet:** No.

**Oval:** No.

**Paul:** No, if they did they would have ended up with their head shaved out in the drill field.

**Chet:** After you were in the band, you wouldn't have been in the band anymore that’s for sure.

**Oval:** Sometimes, couple of them would help each other back to the ship or back to base or wherever they were going. One leaning on the other but the [unclear 00:39:42] didn't bother them as long as they could keep moving.

**Paul:** I guess what I was driving out was if as a form of punishment I was wondering if the coast guardsmen would then be forced to do some kind of maintenance work on the island or you know some kind. I'm just wondering what the punishments were.

**Chet:** They had work to do, like we'd see them out repairing things and that type but there's always guards even though you were on the island they couldn't have gotten off. They were always separated from the general people who were on the island.

**Paul:** Did either of you gentlemen ever have any experience with coming into this building, the immigration building, the main building where people, the detainees would have been or any or seen detainees or any of that kind?

**Chet:** We did not come in here at all.

**Oval:** Didn't come in and didn't discuss or talk with the immigrants.

**Paul:** Did you see, I mean?

**Oval:** We could see them but we didn't go. They were at the fence asking you to come give them a cigarette or do something but we stayed away from them. We were told, "Don't try to socialize with the ones on the other side of the fence [crosstalk 00:41:03], it’s off limits. You probably can't understand them, their language or they're from various countries ever were and they're here for a purpose just like you're here to do one thing and you do your thing let them do their thing."

**Paul:** But there was an exterior part of the island that was fenced that you were on one side and they were on the other.

**Chet:** And they were on the other, that’s good.

**Oval:** But we had our guards who would patrol around the island on the coast guards side.

**Paul:** Also there was watch duty here on the island then.

**Chet:** Yes, if one man was with us he had a lot of that, he was more less one--

**Oval:** He was in the guard day unit.

**Paul:** But neither of you had to do that?

**Oval:** No.

**Chet:** No.

**Paul:** What were they guarding against [laughter]?

**Oval:** Who knows.

**Chet:** I said I don't know who wanted to come on because we were in the service where it was more or less I guess if anybody wanted to try and get off.

**Oval:** And you couldn't get off unless you caught the ferry [laughter].

**Chet:** Yeah, and they were always checked real well, your identification and your pass before you left and before you--

**Oval:** ID card.

**Chet:** Before you turned it in when you came in and then you had to pick it up to go back home.

**Paul:** So there were check points on either side before you got on the ferry?

**Chet:** But the ferry was always full. I don't remember it not being [crosstalk 00:42:31].

**Oval:** Yeah, a lot of people riding the ferry.

**Paul:** Can you describe for me- I'll ask Chet, can you describe for me what the Ferry looked like?

**Chet:** All I remember was it was huge [laughter]. It was a big ferry and then we'd come in right to the dock out here and then everybody tried to scramble to get off, wait to get off but going they all wanted to get on there quickly [chuckle]. So it’s just the opposite but [crosstalk 00:43:01].

**Paul:** Now when you got off the ferry did you have to go into the ferry building before you could go to wherever or what you were going or could just--?

**Chet:** No.

**Oval:** You went through a building.

**Chet:** You had, they took your pass. You still showed your identification because anybody could have had that sailor suit, so you still showed and your picture was on there and they looked at you and they took their time and then you went back to business where you were [crosstalk 00:43:30].

**Paul:** Well, of course being you know more time everyone is even more sensitive to--

**Oval:** If I recall that ferry, you said it was large. I think it seemed like to me it could hold just a couple of vehicles. Can you--

**Chet:** I don't remember vehicles.

**Oval:** No, I don't remember vehicle ever being on it but it was- could have transported vehicles because there were some vehicles here on the island.

**Chet:** But there weren't enough seats for everyone. I remember you had to stand.

**Oval:** Yeah, you did a lot of standing but I think it was if I recall maybe I'm thinking about another ferry.

**Paul:** You mentioned vehicles on the island, what do you recall about them?

**Oval:** I don't know I’d seen like there were.

**Paul:** That’s an important question really.

**Oval:** Like a formed vehicle or hauling dirt or trash or garbage or something like that, that would come aboard, come on on to pick up trash to get [cross talk 00:44:35].

**Chet:** I don't remember any military vehicles.

**Paul:** Do you remember any vehicles at all? Any kind of motorcycles or something?

**Oval:** Or what did they do with trash, garbage? They didn't bury it here, I would say they to take it back and it seems like to me that ferry could carry a truck or two.

**Paul:** Where was the ferry landing in Battery Park? Do you remember where it was exactly?

**Oval:** At the end of Manhattan, I don't know.

**Paul:** Because now there's a large coast guard building which would have been built after your tenure in the coast guard. I'm just wondering its down by the Staten Island ferry, if it was in that spot then...

**Chet:** I couldn’t tell you I don't know.

**Oval:** I don't believe it’s there.

**Paul:** What about, did either of you gentlemen have any interaction with the public health service hospital at all?

**Chet:** No.

**Oval:** No.

**Paul:** Do you recall any instance either of you where either you or one of your colleagues needed medical attention?

**Oval:** No.

**Paul:** No, Chet?

**Oval:** As far as I know, no one in our class had to drop out or leave because of sickness or injury.

**Paul:** I assume you prior had to undergo some kind of a physical examination either before you got here or once you got here.

**Oval:** I don't recall any.

**Chet:** Yeah, I had physicals especially when I was then stationed here more or less permanent.

**Paul:** Well, because you were here for a much longer time so I suppose it would make sense but so neither of you ever went over to the hospital?

**Chet:** I was over then for that.

**Paul:** Well, what do you remember about that experience?

**Chet:** I remember I had a tooth fixed and I had a bridge and it’s the same one, original and it was done here in the island and the dentists that I've been to they marvel at the way this was done.

**Paul:** This is an interesting, I've interviewed one of the dentists who was here in the 1940's, I wonder what he’s saying now [laughter].

**Chet:** But they do--

**Paul:** He's a real character.

**Chet:** But they do, they said what a fine job was done.

**Paul:** Can you remember any of the specifics of the experience? What the room looked like? What the equipment looked like?

**Chet:** I know it was very clean, very clean. I remember being apprehensive about having it done and he assured me this would be a good job and it was because every dentist I've gone to have mentioned about this.

**Paul:** My goodness, a 50 year old bridge that’s still going strong [chuckle], the original Ellis Island bridge [laughter].

**Chet:** That’s pretty good.

**Paul:** But that was your only experience over in the public health service area. Well let’s see, you were here in the summer, how did you celebrate the 4th of July here? Do you remember? Was there a celebration?

**Oval:** I can't, no answer. I can't and I don't remember it.

**Paul:** Were you ever allowed to go over to the statue of liberty for any reason or did you go over I should--?

**Oval:** No, I never went over. I could have by going to catch the ferry to it but I never did. It was right here in sight.

**Paul:** Yeah right, you know stone's throw away.

**Oval:** Right here in sight, I could see the flame every night I just walk outside but I never went over to the statue of liberty.

**Paul:** Chet, what about holidays here? did the coast guards - for instance you were here at a Christmas time you know what did they provide for the coast guards that you can recall?

**Chet:** Well if you had the time off, I did in one year and I had to be here for the taps and revelry, that was the reason I had to be here but we played a lot in the summer, Memorial Day and 4th of July we had a parades and we played at various functions. That’s the one time we played at radio city.

**Paul:** But anything here on the island that you can recall that was done as a special treat for the coast guardsmen. I mean either a Christmas party or--?

**Chet:** Well they had special dinner and sometimes they had the dance and they'd come over but not on Christmas day, not on the day itself and during the summer we didn't have any dancing because it was too hot, that’s in the logs, here at the weekly logs that they had out. They would be resumed again in September because of the heat. There was no air condition [laughter].

**Paul:** Right.

**Oval:** No air condition [laughter].

**Chet:** It got pretty hot when you had a big group in there.

**Paul:** When you played for a dance, who came? Were civilians from New York invited to come out to this dance or?

**Chet:** No, it was the people who were stationed here plus they brought in the women, young women.

**Paul:** And where did these women come from? Who were they?

**Chet:** From USO's, church groups, groups of that type. They would come in and I remember we had Miss America. I have here one of the Miss America’s was here. They had different celebrities come in and perform.

**Paul:** This is you were mentioning Martha Raye before that you remember.

**Chet:** As in we would play for some of them and some they had their own band, their own group who played and they did it for free of gratis for the troops because here is where a lot of them went into combat, went onto ships and they left from here for Europe or the East, South.

**Paul:** I see, so this was like the last point before you were shipped out that time.

**Chet:** On the islands yeah, that’s where a lot of them left, right from here.

**Oval:** When our class was over of course I went back to Norfolk as well as Babao and we were assigned to ships. We probably had the orders when we left here what ship we would go in on, I didn't know until I got to Norfolk.

**Paul:** Was there like a little graduation for your class? How did the experience end here at Ellis Island for you or for [laughter]?

**Oval:** Happened before my day you know 50 years ago [laughter].

**Paul:** Well, I mean do you remember--?

**Oval:** I don't remember any- there was some little exercise and I think some of them received their rating for Sigmund our quartermaster third class. We were told just a few days before they’d cut the number that could not graduate but would increase from seaman or wherever you were rated, most of us were seamen striking for quartermaster in Sigmund, there was only about I think somewhere I have in my mind 30% that could or could not. I don't know which way it went so I went out as a striker. I was still a seaman in first class.

**Chet:** Is that 66 dollars a month then?

**Oval:** No, 54.

**Chet:** 54 was.

**Oval:** Well you know 66.

**Chet:** 66 and then you went to 78 when you got to strike.

**Oval:** 78 when you got a major strike.

**Chet:** We really were on the way [later].

**Oval:** Seaman was--

**Chet:** That was a month.

**Oval:** The apprentice seaman was 50 and then 54 and then 66 and then to 78.

**Paul:** How did they pay you? Did they pay you in check? How? Do you remember?

**Oval:** In board ship we do it in money cash.

**Paul:** What about here in the island? Do you remember?

**Oval:** I don’t remember, I think we had a pay master and you went to the paymaster's quarters or rooms or office.

**Chet:** On the island.

**Oval:** Here, and he counted out $66 to you.

**Chet:** And you signed.

**Paul:** Which reminds me, was there a store or something here on the island where you could buy gum or something?

**Chet:** Oh yeah.

**Oval:** You buy candy bars and chewing gum.

**Paul:** Do you remember where the store was?

**Chet:** Right near the mess hall right?

**Oval:** Yeah, close to the mess hall.

**Paul:** And you could buy candy and cigarettes.

**Oval:** Candy right, those things.

**Chet:** I didn't smoke and I resented that I had to pick up the butts [laughter], he was there was the one [laughter], I used to resent that, you had to do that.

**Paul:** You mentioned the mess hall and you know we haven't even talked about food, what do you remember about food on Ellis Island? I'll start with Oval, what do you remember about eating [chuckle]?

**Oval:** I was absolutely was alright, I survived it [laughter] but I really don't remember. I'll say this and I've said it many times, the coast guard always fed well, always had a dry clean place to sleep and I didn't have to dig a fox hole ever.

**Paul:** It was a comfortable tenure.

**Chet:** When we were here.

**Oval:** There was a very nice experience, four years of good health of living, food was always good and so I had no complaints about the food.

**Paul:** Chet, what do you remember about the food and where you were fed and the kinds of things you were fed? It’s an important question.

**Chet:** Well, I was good. I thought it was good food. You could get as much as you wanted.

**Oval:** Always.

**Chet:** If you wanted more you could always ask for more.

**Paul:** Who served you the food? Fellow coast guardsmen or was there a staff?

**Oval:** Oh yeah.

**Chet:** No, it was fellow coast guardsmen. You went through the line as you did on the ship and they had the cooks.

**Paul:** So men are serving you also then.

**Chet:** Right.

**Paul:** You're not coming in contact with any female employees.

**Oval:** No.

**Chet:** And you did not have choices, real choices. It was this is spaghetti and this is it.

**Oval:** Well, before I came here I was aboard this 50 footer, it was five of us and I took the job as being cook. I don't know why but [laughter] I ordered the food and there was a store up, they delivered it and we paid the bill at the end of the month.

We get out Czech and Russians and [00:55:52] and we'd pay the grocery store bill. Tonight we'd have pork chops okay, I order pork chops and next night we'd have steak or whatever we're going to have.

**Paul:** You're a man of many talents [laughter].

**Oval:** I did the cooking there for a while.

**Paul:** Chet, just in our few remaining minutes, Oval's told me a little bit about how he got off the island. Can you tell me a little bit the same please?

**Chet:** Well, I was young and I thought I want to help win the war, so I asked for a transfer onto a ship.

**Paul:** And you'd been here a year and some odd months at that point. Was it sad to leave the island in a way? It had been your home for so long.

**Chet:** In a way it was but as I said I was young, I wanted to see some of the world so I went onto the IGNOU, L scot a transport.

**Paul:** U period L period Scot, is that the name of the ship?

**Chet:** UHUGH.

**Paul:** Ooh Hugh like the man's name, ooh the Hugh. I see.

**Chet:** Yeah and we carried 5000 troops, it was 500 crew on it and we go to Europe and we took troops to India that area and the south pacific and on the day the war ended I was in Naples and we were going to take members of the army over to the pacific because the war had been over in Europe and everything ended and we were so surprised.

We went to India, Karachi, Calcutta. I was in the south pacific. I was in Europe, so I did get to see quite a bit of the world. Then I was also with the chaplains since they knew I had played, I had my trumpet and violin and I used to play for the church services.

I played really at all three, Protestants, Catholic and Jewish and I've never seen Jewish service and was quite amazed and got to know and after the service I corresponded with two of the chaplains.

So every Sunday I used to have a musical solo at one of the services and then the Jewish of course they have theirs on different days and I used to play either before or after with that.

**Paul:** Interesting way of spending the war [chuckle]. We need to end now, we're out of time but I want to thank you both, this is been very interesting and it was a good combination, two very different sides of [laughter] of the same story.

This is Paul Secrest signing off with Oval Williams and Chet Acaley on Wednesday May 18th 1994, here at the Ellis Island museum, gentlemen thank you.

**Oval:** It’s been a pleasure.