**Kate:** Good afternoon.

**Larry:** Afternoon.

**Kate:** This is Kate Moore for the National Park Service and today is the 27th of January, 1994.

**Larry:** You're right.

**Kate:** And I'm in Poway at the home of Larry F Briske who was in the coast guard at Ellis Island in the 1950s. Why don't you begin by giving us your full name and date of birth please?

**Larry:** Larry Floyd Briske, I was born 13th November of 1931.

**Kate:** And where were you born?

**Larry:** Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

**Kate:** Could you tell us in what capacity you were at Ellis Island and when- exact dates?

**Larry:** I was in the coast guard and I enlisted in the coast guard in December 1951 and left the coast guard in December, 1954 and I was there in the early part of the 50s, I think 51', 52' probably would say it.

**Kate:** And the coast guard, what were you responsible for?

**Larry:** I was a gunner’s man, I took care of pistols and things like that and ride guns in case they ever needed them. We used to guard piers, piers where they were shipping flammable things or something that we had to be careful that didn’t- either the [unclear 00:01:19].

**Kate:** Where did you live on Ellis Island?

**Larry:** I lived in the hospital on the other side of the immigration building. There was a quarter between and when we went in we'd go over to the- when the ferry pulled and we'd go to the left where the hospitals were where we stayed.

**Kate:** Could you describe the condition of the hospital and describe the hospital for us in any terms, where you lived?

**Larry:** Well, I recollect the hospital was in pretty good condition, we stayed there, we kept it clean. I don't remember too much about it except that we stayed in the rooms and I remember I was in the room with four people and I know my best friend that time was in a room with seven or eight people and some had rooms that were small amount of people.

I remember the mess hall was in the basement in the big room which I think was the cafeteria at the time the hospital was open and we had everything. We had dry-cleaning, everything downstairs and I stay on the second floor and there were guys up on third floor. I stayed on the second and the guys on the first floor. I don't remember we had three floors or not, I'm not sure [chuckle].

**Kate:** What about the condition of the building in general in terms of plaster and--?

**Larry:** They were places where the plaster was loose or coming down. There was nothing that was of any danger to us or anything like that but it was an old place.

**Kate:** At that time, was Ellis Island in operation?

**Larry:** The immigration part? No, it was not, it was closed down.

**Kate:** And the reason why you were in the hospital was because that was no longer in use, is that true?

**Larry:** That’s right, the coast guards were using it to birth the coast guardsmen who did the pier guarding and things like that, we stayed in there.

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

**Larry:** No, I don't think so. I think that the fact that it was a hospital and it was inconvenienced for us the military and manner of things. I think that’s probably why they moved to another place after a while.

**Kate:** Were you able to see Ellis Island? It was closed at that time but the immigration part. Were you permitted to go?

**Larry:** No, we were prohibited [laughter] from going over but we would sneak over there and take a look at the place. My memory brings forth a huge big hall, that’s what I saw a huge big hall and it was empty and there wasn't any tables or anything there but I suppose that there had been, they put them away but I remember seeing the big hall and I remember kind of going around other places on the Island looking. We didn't get into buildings, most of the buildings were locked, we couldn't get into them.

**Kate:** And what was your impression of the place in terms of the conditions?

**Larry:** It was clean and it was old [chuckle], it was eerie because when you're 20 years old, 21 years and you know about the immigration policies and things that were happening, the people coming in and the stories they told you know to walk in that big hall I mean you were just in awe.

**Kate:** Did you ever hear any stories about Ellis Island?

**Larry:** Not while I was there, no.

**Kate:** But since then you've told people you were stationed there they told you?

**Larry:** Oh yeah, I would say I was stationed there.

**Kate:** And what most of the things that people told you when you told that you were there, what kind of stories did they tell you?

**Larry:** Hardly anything anymore. I have never come across anybody around here that says they went through Ellis Island as an immigrant, never have.

**Kate:** So they'd have to come through before 1951. What did the coast guard use? Elaborate it a little bit more on the dock guarding that you did and why and also with the arms.

**Larry:** The piers in New York harbor, there were piers that had boxes and crates and things that they shipped out or took in that had like explosives or things that we had to be careful for so you wouldn't blow up the pier and so the coast guard was responsible for guarding as they go, the pistol honor and we'd get into A3 footer and they would take us over to these different piers and we'd hop off and we'd stand at the entrance to pier and check IDs of people coming on because of sabotage and we would walk the pier itself to make sure the stewardess weren't smoking and if they were smoking we report them and just for general safety sake.

**Kate:** And was the location of Ellis Island particularly good for- 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?

**Larry:** I think they used Ellis Island just thinking back because it was the only place they had to go right then. I think they were thinking of moving into a pier in New York itself you know Manhattan Island itself and as you know eventually went to put us on what used to be Governor’s Island and I think those were the long range plans but in the meantime all they had was the closed down Ellis Island to stay.

**Kate:** What was going to be moved to Governors Island?

**Larry:** The coast guard.

**Kate:** But what about in terms of immigration do you see why Ellis Island was chosen in terms of its isolation?

**Larry:** Yeah [chuckle] because it was surrounded by water like you say it was isolated and I can see why they would put people in there when they first came in, it was an ideal spot.

**Kate:** Right before it was closed. There still were a fleet of boat that used to take people from the big liners to the islands, sort of tag boats. People describe a fleet run by I don't know if it was the coast guard or who it was run by.

**Larry:** Never saw that.

**Kate:** Never saw that.

**Larry:** No, the only boat we had was the ferry boat that went down the battery and back to Ellis Island, back and forth and took us there. Took the men off from liberty beside only A3 footer of course but that’s only what there were there, coming in there, there was only one of them too and it was scary because it was very foggy night, that old thing would creek and creek and especially in the bad weather and sometimes it would miss the slip and sometimes the last boat at was at 1O'clock and if we didn't make it we slept down the boat [laughter], sometimes at down the battery or if it was too foggy we stayed the battery you know. There's some stories that port I'll tell you but that was the only thing they had, that ferry going back and forth.

**Kate:** Did any of the people with whom you work- were they staying at Ellis Island working before that? When Ellis Island was an immigration center. Did you know anyone?

**Larry:** I would say probably so. No, I don't know anybody.

**Kate:** So the transition from Ellis Island going from immigration to a military post, for a coast guard post, did anybody comment on that to you?

**Larry:** No, I never heard any stories about that, never.

**Kate:** Tell us a little bit about you were there from 1950 and 1950--

**Larry**: 1951 I went into the coastguard, December so I was there in 52' sometimes, the exact month I don't remember, 52' and I was there for about a year.

**Kate:** Until?

**Larry:** Probably sometimes in 53' or early 54'. I left the coast guard at the end of 54' but I was stationed [unclear 00:09:00] toward the end there though. Summer times I was sent out to Kate Millers Jersey because I was a gunners man working on the rifle range as winter fall, the winter we'd come back when it wasn't the firing season and I would work in Ellis island.

**Kate:** And where did you go after that? You're now a reverend.

**Larry:** Well, when I got out of the coast guard, I finished college.

**Kate:** Where?

**Larry:** At University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and then worked for a while and then went to the seminary eventually.

**Kate:** And you are now in what capacity?

**Larry:** I'm Roman Catholic priest now.

**Kate:** Of a parish here in catholic?

**Larry:** Well I work in Saint Michael’s parish here in Poway, yes.

**Kate:** Have you ever gone back to Ellis Island?

**Larry:** One time I did but it was a long time ago, nobody was there anymore. I went back again just when they opened it up when they renovated the whole thing and you could go there and look around and it was nice.

**Kate:** When was that, what year?

**Larry:** I don't remember that at all.

**Kate:** How many years ago, roughly, say a ball park for you?

**Larry:** That must be maybe 10 years ago, 12 years ago when I was in the navy, held a navy [unclear 00:10:14] for 24 years.

**Kate:** Why did you go back?

**Larry:** Because I was in the area. When I went back I went to Staten where I was first, the base that was the foot Staten or the ferry docking that was closed up, just for old times’ sake to see if I could remember what I could see.

**Kate:** What was different?

**Larry:** It was dead [laughter], Ellis island nobody was there, there were visitors there you know you could- no there weren't any visitors there. You know what I’m thinking of, I'm thinking that we got a ride on a boat to go back there but it was closed, there wasn't anybody there. The ferry was in the slip but they weren't running that ferry anymore, right.

**Kate:** Have you been back since it’s been renovated?

**Larry:** No, I'm thinking about the renovations, you know I was thinking of the statue of liberty, that’s what I was thinking about not Ellis Island.

**Kate:** Because it would be interesting if you go back now and see the difference and the museum.

**Larry:** I’d love to. They got a museum there now?

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Larry:** It would be fun to go back there.

**Kate:** How did the archives get a hold of you?

**Larry:** I think they got a hold of a guy that was my best friend up there at the time who now lives in Pennsylvania, [unclear 00:11:39] of Harrisburg, I think he mentioned me because we were together up there. I had a girl in Harrisburg and weekends we used to go up to Harrisburg and go out.

**Kate:** And what was the name of your friend just in case I get [unclear 00:11:53]?

**Larry:** F. William Gregory.

**Kate:** He mentioned that you worked there at the time?

**Larry:** Yeah, we were together there at that time.

**Kate:** Is there anything else you can say about this that you remember any stories or anything about the immigration time?

**Larry:** Not about immigration.

**Kate:** Give us one about this- you started smiling. Give us one about the time that you worked there.

**Larry:** The guys used to just do some awful things there you know, I remember one time when I was the gunners man and I had charge the little bit of room where they kept the pistols and things and I had the night watch for something, that wasn't for the guns it was for something and we used to congregate in the room where the telephone switch board was, it was quite a large room, we used to read the paper and sit around there and drink coffee and I remember one of the guys was reading the papers and he says, "Hi, I got an idea."

I remember there was an ad at the paper for a guy that wanted to sell his boat and it was about 2 in the morning and so they all got [chuckle] around the phone and called this guy at 2 in the morning that they have to have a boat very fast and they paid him like 50% more than what he was asking if he would come down and bring the boat down and so [laughter] we stood there with binoculars and watch those guys at the boat circle around around with the battery you know [laughter].

Its nasty but the sailors would do a lot of things like that to keep themselves occupied and they used to [laughter] pull tricks like that. The nights would go by fast when you had night duty sometimes. Now Bill Gregory worked on the switchboard and he also worked in the coast guard exchange so he would remember that story too. Those are just things, sailors would be sailors.

**Kate:** You have another one?

**Larry:** No, I don't remember anymore right now [laughter] and probably after you leave, I'll probably remember some more.

**Kate:** Well, thank you on behalf of Ellis Island oral history project.

**Larry:** I wish I could tell you more, I enjoyed the time there and I wish there was more I could tell about the place.

**Kate:** Well, we appreciate it anyway and this is Kate Moore signing off from Pawe California on January 27th, 1994.