**Janet:** Today is October 13th, 1995. We are here in the Oral History Studio at Ellis Island. I’m here with Knud Hansen who was in the Coast Guards here at Ellis Island from February 1952 until November 1953, a period of 22 months. I’m looking forward to whatever you can remember about being here. Why don’t we start at the beginning? If you would you say where you were born and when you were born.

**Knud:** I was born in Brooklyn like so many immigrant children and brought up … Spent my first 18 years in Brooklyn and then from that time on until I was about 16 I lived in Staten Island and then recently moved upstate New York.

**Janet:** What’s your birth date?

**Knud:** My birth date is January 6th 1931.

**Janet:** When you were 18 and you left Brooklyn, did you … The Coast Guards.

**Knud:** I joined the Coast Guard in 1950, so I was 19 years old when I joined the Coast Guard, November 1950. I was in for three years.

**Janet:** You’ve mentioned first that you were a child of immigrants. Where were your parents from?

**Knud:** Parents were from Norway. My father, when he immigrated came through Baltimore but my mother and my grandmother spent overnight on Ellis Island. The story that she tells, she had a cold and her mother kept telling her, “Don’t cough because they won’t let you in if you cough.” I didn’t realize and I knew the story until I came to Ellis Island after it had been restored and read some of the stories how frightened some of the immigrants were of being turned back.

**Janet:** Were your mother and grandmother alive when you were here, when you were stationed here?

**Knud:** Yes. My mother lived to be 90 and was here well through that time and mentioned it but at that time it didn’t really click in my mind. It wasn’t until much later and I started coming here when the Island was restored that I realized the significance of the place.

**Janet:** Your mother was alive when it was restored or not?

**Knud:** No. She had died before they really got to … Had done any work on it at all.

**Janet:** How old was your mother? Do you recall when she came through?

**Knud:** She was 16 years old. Came in 1908, came over in 1908.

**Janet:** What was her name?

**Knud:** Her name was Sigrid Hartwigsen. Her name is on the wall as a matter of fact, as is my father’s. He also came from Norway, from the same town in Norway but they knew each other only casually and met here and married.

**Janet:** Did he have anything that he remembered about Ellis Island?

**Knud:** He didn’t-

**Janet:** He didn’t come to Ellis Island, about his immigration perhaps.

**Knud:** He was a maritime person and finished out his career a lieutenant commander in the Coast Guard. He was in the marine inspection unit which was housed up in Manhattan, in Lower Manhattan. That’s probably why I wound up and joining the Coast Guard because I knew about it. A lot of people didn’t at that time and I’m sure that’s what influenced me. Had a brother also that was retired as a captain in the Coast Guards so there was some Coast Guard influence there.

**Janet:** What was your father’s name?

**Knud:** Knud as a matter of fact.

**Janet:** And your grandmother who came through Ellis Island?

**Knud:** I only remember her nickname which her husband called her. It was Kaia, K-A-I-A, Kaia Hartwigsen. My grandfather was all sailed on sailing ships and he died at sea which was the fate of many … He was the captain of the ship. Apparently he was coming back from South America and this was around 1900, around the turn of the century where there was some sort of disease at the place. We have the last letters he wrote and he evidently got it. It made him dizzy and he fell overboard and that was that.

**Janet:** That occurred before your grandmother came to this country.

**Knud:** Yes, probably was the reason she came to this country because when the captain died, there were no pensions or anything in those days. You just lost your livelihood. She struggled a while and had a store and a telephone exchange on the island on where she lived outside [inaudible00:05:21]. At one point two of her brothers had come over here and said, “Come on over.” She and my mother came at that time.

**Janet:** Did you grandmother, or your mother, or your father, did they retain any Norwegian ways?

**Knud:** Lots of them and so do I, yes.

**Janet:** What-

**Knud:** Foods, we have certain ways of celebrating the holidays. I have been back to Norway. My wife’s family also comes from Norway. I have been back to Norway six times. I’ve been to Norway six times. We have lots of friends and family that we meet and go to their houses and they come over here and we show them New York. That has been a wonderful addition to our lives. It’s really been great.

Mostly foods and the way the house is decorated. We have things that we buy in Norway, and bring back, and put up on the walls. People feel when they come in and they say, “This is place is like Norway.” It’s the all the stuff that we have around.

**Janet:** How about attitudes, are there any kind of ways of viewing the world?

**Knud:** I guess my father always felt that you … He would always encourage you to get the next license, the next biggest license or the next degree. He could never understand I was in education. He could never understand why I didn’t want to become a principle because that would be the next logical step up.

He would always say to me, “Why don’t you become a principle?” because in his mind, you always studied for the next thing, and you went up and up and up. He was an impressive man. At one time I was a late teenager and I visit him in his office. We were talking and we were going to go out to lunch or something like that.

He got a phone call. The person was giving him numbers having to do with stress on a boiler. He took out a slide rule and kept the conversation up with the person as he worked the slide rule. When he was finished with the conversation, or finished with the slide rule, he gave the person the answer that he wanted on the stress factors. That always impressed me how he could do both at the same time. At that time, the slide rule was like magic. Since we have computers we don’t need slide rules anymore.

**Janet:** That’s a beautiful image of your father. You went to high school in Brooklyn?

**Knud:** Yes.

**Janet:** And finished in Brooklyn.

**Knud:** Fort Hamilton High School in Brooklyn. Lived in a Norwegian neighborhood, 8th Avenue in 57th Street where you could go to any store and ask for something in Norwegian and the store owner or people working behind the counter who might be Italian or Jewish or German would answer you and talk to you in Norwegian. Never had to do that because I don’t speak Norwegian but I had been in the store plenty of times when people would be talking to the Jewish counterman in Norwegian and he would be talking back. That was not uncommon in Brooklyn at that time.

**Janet:** When you moved to Staten Island, was it also a Norwegian area?

**Knud:** No, when we moved to Staten Island, I was still living at home. Then very soon after that went into the Coast Guard and got married and then lived with my parents in an apartment in that house for a while before we bought a house on Staten Island. At one point all my family lived in New York City.

None of us live in New York City. I’m the last of nine. We are all over the place. Those of us that still alive are all over Ohio, Florida. We have a family reunion every year which we get between 100 and 125 people. We try to keep the family together that way rather than only meeting at weddings and funerals.

**Janet:** Do you remember your feelings about your decision to go into the Coast Guard?

**Knud:** No. I had looked around for going … It was during the Korean War. I think the Air Force. You had to enlist for four years. Those at the Navy I think was four years and the Coast Guard was three years. Looking forward to getting out, I decided that I’d go on the Coast Guard and also with the family background of my father being in the Coast Guard I figured that would be a good thing to do.

**Janet:** When you signed up, where did you go?

**Knud:** I went to Groton, Connecticut to boot camp.

**Janet:** Exactly when was that again?

**Knud:** That would be November ’50 and went to Groton, Connecticut. I was up there I believe 16 or 17 weeks. Then I was assigned to the port security unit at Pier 9 in Manhattan. That was the first place I was assigned. Relatively soon after that, I put in for Engineman school which was also in Groton, Connecticut so I went back up to Groton Connecticut and went through Engineman School. When I came out to Engineman School, I was assigned to Ellis Island.

**Janet:** Were you married at this time?

**Knud:** Let’s see. I think I got married February of ’52. That’s just about the time … I had to go to Port Security School also which was down in Georgia. Coming out of that, I had leave and got married during that time. I was married when I came to Ellis Island.

**Janet:** Who did you marry?

**Knud:** Gladys Ostenburg was the person I married, again, who both of whose parents came from a place called Skudenes, Norway on the West Coast, a charming town that we have been back to many times. She has more relatives in Norway than she has here. They now have started coming over visiting us. It has been a great experience for them. We had a cousin over this summer and one last summer.

**Janet:** Is that when you take your trips to Ellis Island?

**Knud:** Yes. That’s when I take the trips to Ellis Island and to Liberty Island, and to Manhattan and ride the subway in World Trade Center the whole day.

**Janet:** Did you know your wife? Did you grow up in the same neighborhood by any chance?

**Knud:** Went to the same church. I met her when she was 13 and I was 14. It was when we meet.

**Janet:** You were both part of at least the same religious community.

**Knud:** Same religious community, same background ethnically. It was very comfortable.

**Janet:** When you got to Ellis Island, what were your duties?

**Knud:** I was an engine man. Ellis Island at the time had I guess between 15 and 20 40 foot patrol boats. They were called 40 footers naturally. They had 2671 GM diesel engines on them and had a sign to them, an engine man, a sea man, a coxswain. That was the crew.

We slept on in the barracks of Ellis Island but when we were on duty, we went on six hour patrols. You’d go six hours, you’d be off six hours, and then you’d go on another six hour patrol. There were I believe four patrols that went up the East river, one went up the Hudson River which I guess would call Hudson River, and one pretty much around Staten Island, down through the keels. Another one went out the narrows went out that way.

**Janet:** What were you patrolling for?

**Knud:** This is during the Korean War. We were just patrolling for anything on toward. The other duties that we had, we had pier guards also on the island and we would take the pier guards out to certain piers that had iron curtain country ships docking. One of the other duties that we had was to, once when I ship docked, there were pier guards on the dork and then we would be outside sitting on the watersides so that nothing would come up to the ship on the waterside to exchange packages or whatever.

Sometimes we would shadow ships when they came in the harbor. If it was an iron curtain country ship, we would shadow it until it was docked and then the pier guards would be there. Again, the height of the cold war, it was a different time. It’s hard to imagine that kind of thing but that’s what we did.

**Janet:** As an engine man, you were there if something went wrong with the engine.

**Knud:** Yeah. We would run the engines, had a log to keep, and had to write down the temperatures and the readings on the gauges every hour in the log. Then when we were at rest, we had to clean the … Check the oil, make sure everything was … Clean the sea strainers, take any debris that was in the mouth so the engines wouldn’t overheat.

If something went with the engine then they would pull a boat out of service and that was there was a crew on Ellis Island that would come down and work on the engine. I would assist them on the repairs, whatever repairs had to be made.

The other patrols that we had were boarding duty. This is in the summer time. We would board yachts and inspect them. That duty was an all-day duty, you’d live practically at sun up and you’d stay out until dawn and take food with you. They have little stove and sink on these boards. You would be out all day and you see a yacht you’d board it and inspect it.

If they failed the inspection, you’d give them what amounted to a ticket and they had to get that whatever was wrong fixed and show that it was fixed and they would mail it back. I don’t know the paper work part of it, but that’s basically what we did. That was choice duty because many times the people on the yachts were partying and they would give you beer which we weren’t supposed to take, but since it’s so many years after that-

**Janet:** You can tell it now.

**Knud:** What we would do is we would take ice with us and a barrel and we just keep putting it in a barrel. When we came back off duty, we would have a welcoming committee.

**Janet:** How was it that the Coast Guard was inspecting pleasure yachts?

**Knud:** Still do. Yes, that’s one of their duties. We had like 10 point inspection and we would go on board and do that inspection, and then leave. If they were inspected by the Coast Guard auxiliary and they had a sticker on the boat, we didn’t bother with it because they had yearly inspections.

One time we came across a small boat that was the top part of it above the boat was plywood and homemade. You could see that. They were out in the middle narrows and there were at least three foot swells, not waves but just swells. This boat was bobbing like a cork all over the place. There had to be 10 people on it and one very pregnant lady.

We came up alongside and we were afraid it was tiny. It was no more than 15 feet, just a tiny thing. That’s right. We shook our heads and said, “What in the world … What are you doing out here?” We chased them back in, back down in the keels where the water couldn’t board it because it too small. We were afraid that we would hit it and sink it but chased them back in.

Other times on patrols, we would pick up the disabled boat and tow it to its own port. That was a common thing. The way the propellers were made on these were for speed and toying ability. You didn’t get a whole lot of speed and you didn’t get a lot of toying ability but you got enough of each so we could do double duty. It did have a big towing ring on it for us to hook up to it.

**Janet:** What kind of satisfactions did you get from what your job was when you were stationed here?

**Knud:** Every other day duty so every other day I went home and every other weekend. In that way it was really choice duty. We did that. I enjoyed that, and I enjoyed being in the boat, and I enjoyed New York harbor. It just was really a wonderful time. I didn’t enjoy the winter time when you had to go out there and just to drop off pier guards some place maybe four, five miles away. You’d come back with an inch of ice on your boat. This did not have deep keels so they would tip easy. We would think about that a lot. For the most part, it was really good duty and I enjoyed it very much.

One other thing that we did at the time we were here during this time, people who were being deported were kept on Ellis Island, aliens that were being deported. Every once in a while, one would climb the fence and jump in the water to swim to New Jersey. They would scramble the boats to the Coast Guard boats. We would go out looking for whoever was in the water.

One time I was on a boat that the coxswain said, “Look, there are two tunnels that go through the island. You could see them at low tide.” It was about half mid tide and this is winter time by the way. He said, “He could be in the there.” We went and stooped down and looked to the flash lights and he was.

We picked him up, and this boat happened to have … We were armed at this point. On the way we would grab weapons and we were armed. We picked him up. We wrapped the blanket around him. We happened to have some hot coffee on there and he was shaking so much from fear and from cold that he couldn’t hold the coffee. The coffee just spilled all over so we had to feed him the coffee in order to get something warm into him. The fear in his eyes was incredible. He surely expected to be shot just by looking at this face.

**Janet:** Where was he being deported to?

**Knud:** I have no idea. We had no real connection with him. One other side line, I played on the softball team and we used to play the exhibition games against the guards on their side of island. We would walk over there and walk through. When we got over to the field, they would be 40 or 50 men out there playing soccer with one soccer ball.

It was just a clouded dust and the ball flying around and 40, 50 men running around kicking it. The guards would clear the field. Actually the first time we went there, we said, “Wow, what’s going on?” we kind of went for our bats and stood with the bats because we didn’t know what was going to go on because the people who were there, the deportees didn’t take to this kindly.

There was some yelling back and forth. Then we played them and we beat them and very soon we became very popular with them. Whenever we came over to play, they would start cheering. They loved us because we always beat the guards. It’s kind of interesting.

In fact, we had one big, real big …John Schmidt. I remember his name. He could really hit the ball. It was like he was Bay Ruth that ran over and touches him. He hit a couple of real long homeruns and they would run over and touch him, and yell at him. They couldn’t understand anything they were saying, but that was kind of interesting.

**Janet:** Do you remember names of anyone else? Did you have an immediate supervisor whose name you know?

**Knud:** I don’t remember any of those names, but I happened to have my pass, my Ellis Island pass with me and the commanding officer was a man by the name of Hutchinson. It looks to me like he was a lieutenant commander Hutchinson. He lived in a house here on Ellis Island in the far corner across from where the renovations had been done.

The barracks was the hospital and he lived across the field from that in one of those houses, beautiful house. It was kept like a garden here. I guess because the Coast Guard had plenty of people to mow it and do whatever. It was beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

**Janet:** That card you mentioned earlier, you’re going to donate to us so if anyone wanted to see such a thing … What was it like generally being here?

**Knud:** It’s interesting when I woke up in the morning, could look out and see the back of the Statue of Liberty which was kind of an interesting thing, always. How could you not like the Statue of Liberty and at it sidelight? The island that my wife’s parents came from is an island called Call Me. There is a copper mine on that island and that’s where the copper for the Statue of Liberty came from, from that island.

I have been to that copper mine specifically I knew ahead of time that that’s where … It’s no longer in use but it is a museum now. One of the big items in the museum, of course are pictures of the Statue of Liberty and it being built in France because the copper came from that mine.

**Janet:** That’s wonderful. You mentioned there were lots of gardens. It was well planted.

**Knud:** Garden and laws. I remember that more than … And tree lined. It was just beautiful. It really was. You didn’t have much to do when you were off duty. The six hours that you … After eating you kind of just hang around or went and played softball out on the … Then there is tennis court, a clay tennis court that I would have to wander around to find it.

It was in a state of disrepair but had all the equipment to get it back in shape. At the time I didn’t play tennis, but there were a couple of tennis players and they asked if I would help them with restoring it. We went out and kind of racked it. It was a pretty good sized roller and the roller was pretty good sized roller that was filled with water.

The first time I visited Ellis Island, I see it on display. I say, “Hey, I used that. I pushed that roller around.” We did get it into playable shape. I used to go around and hit the ball but I didn’t know what I was doing. Some of the guys used to go there and play tennis. That was kind of fun. The part of the place that was a wreck hall and I would have to walk through to find out exactly where that was, and it would show movies there in the night. Seven, eight o’clock or something like that they would show a movie.

**Janet:** Was that like every night or a couple of nights a week?

**Knud:** It might have been a couple of nights a week. That pool table, ping pong tables, books, you know, that was the [inaudible 00:27:49] for the guys.

**Janet:** How about many coast guards were here just roughly?

**Knud:** With the pier guards and all, it had to be 2-300 men I would guess what would be here. I’m trying to think. Our barracks we had about maybe 40 in our barracks alone. Easily 300 men, it might have been more than that here.

**Janet:** Did you ever venture at that time into Ellis Island in the hall?

**Knud:** When we played softball games, and I specifically remember the first time we had to walk through the main building. I remember walking through that. Of course, it was in a tremendous state of disrepair. It was paint peeling off the walls and really in poor shape. I walked through there and so steps wandered around little bit being curious.

One other time I went through there, walked upstairs into the great hall. I say that the hair on my neck stood up and I didn’t know why. I really wasn’t into Ellis Island at that time. I guess it was just the ghosts of Ellis Island. It was something about it because years after it had been restored and I have come back, and I have been back many times, I can understand what would happen.

**Janet:** I think we’ll pause here and turn the tape over and then we’ll continue. We’re continuing now with side two of this interview with Knud Hansen. To go back, are there other names of people that you recall who were here when you were here?

**Knud:** Not of offices but I remember the person who became I guess my best friend in the service stationed here but we were on opposite duties. When I was off, he was on.

**Janet:** He was also an engine man.

**Knud:** Yes. Also we went to Engine Man School together. I met him the day I enlisted. A funny story is that he dressed … He had this long like Carmel coat on. To me, I thought to myself, “There is one I guy I’m going to stay away from.” He and his friend with him, just two nasty looking guys and as it turned out within a couple of weeks, we became friends and were in each other’s weddings and things like that. You can’t tell a book by its cover. Sometimes first impressions are way off but haven’t seen him or talked to him in quite a while.

**Janet:** Did you keep contact with him after you were out of the coast guards?

**Knud:** For a while, yes. We did keep in contact but then as happens, you get busy and the contact was lost. I haven’t really spoken to him. This has to be 15 years now since I’ve talked to him.

**Janet:** Was there any public health activity going on at Ellis Island when you were-?

**Knud:** None, no. I remember two more names, Earl Shuffler and Lenny Whiz. Lenny Whiz was the coxswain of the boat that I spent most of the time on and Earl Shuffler was the sea man. The reason I remember is I have these pictures. That’s Earl Shuffler. You can’t see him but Lenny Whiz is at the controls of the … This is what the boat looked like.

**Janet:** Do you have any sense of where this people might be if we were to contact them?

**Knud:** Tony Monacan, I might be able to call you up and give you an address for. These people I don’t know … The Healy twins. I played softball with them. One of them got married. They were so identical looking that the married brother so that he could have every weekend home, when it came time for him to have a duty weekend would give his wedding ring to his other brother and stay and do the duty weekends. He did that for a couple of months after his brother was married so he could have every weekend home. Of course, everybody knew it but the officers. It was just one of those things that were done. I mentioned John Schmidt. That’s John Schmidt here. This is me over here.

**Janet:** We’re going to have either copies or Xeroxes or pictures in your file. That will be really good to have. When November ’53 rolled around. What happened as far as you’re-?

**Knud:** November ’53 rolled around and I anticipated getting out.

**Janet:** Because your three years were up.

**Knud:** Three years were up and they tried to get you to sign up again and promise you a promotion and all that. I had other things by then. I think I had a child that was about a year old and I had matured enough to realize that if I was going to do anything I had to go to college.

Ongoing into the service, that was the furthest thing from my mind going to college. I loathed through high school and maybe even thought about going to college. I did attend NYU for a while because I worked there but that was only because it was free. I just kind of took courses. While in Coast Guard I figured, “Yeah, I’ve got to do that,” and went into education.

As soon as I got out, I begun going at night and then eventually quit my job and went full time. My wife worked and got me through college.

**Janet:** Have you ever had Coast Guard reunions?

**Knud:** Never had a Coast Guard reunion, never called up about one. I did go to see a buddy of mine who lived up in Boston but he was never on Ellis Island. He was from other places before I came to Ellis Island.

**Janet:** Is there anything else about Ellis Island that you recall, perhaps boats getting here and going off of here for passes or anything about the grounds or the buildings, any other-?

**Knud:** The only odd thing, again, was that tennis court. The story is told to me that at one time the city morgue was on Ellis Island. I don’t know if that’s true. That’s something that could be checked on. On the ferry there was supposedly a room where when there were carrying a body, this is the room that they would put it in and there was a little room on the ferry that could carry a coffin, about the size of the coffin.

**Janet:** The ferry is of the same ilk as what is now sunk in the-

**Knud:** The very same ferry, yes that used to go back and forth. It would go in where the Staten Island Ferry and the Governor’s Island Ferry goes in now it had its own slip because it was a much smaller boat. It would go in and out at that spot.

**Janet:** The same spot that the Staten Island Ferry was in.

**Knud:** Alongside it. It was a smaller slip and it would go in there, but they are all in that same area.

**Janet:** Did you have more than one child?

**Knud:** Yes. I had another child about 10 years later, a daughter.

**Janet:** Their names?

**Knud:** Knud and Melinda.

**Janet:** It seems like Ellis Island has a lot of history for you.

**Knud:** Oh yes.

**Janet:** The most.

**Knud:** More and more as I come here, as I’ve been coming here. I tell people about my experiences on Ellis Island when we come over and point out where my barracks was, where I used to go in and out, where the boat was docked. It kind of adds a little to the tour when we come here.

**Janet:** Hopefully, we can answer more today if we go to these other areas. When people were here in the coastguard, were there many people with associations of immigrant parents or other associations with Ellis Island who were stationed here? Was there ever anything that they came up in conversation?

**Knud:** Nothing ever brought up. I think back on it. Again, I was out to lunch about the whole thing. I tell people growing up in Brooklyn. I didn’t know anybody whose parents were born in the United States, mostly from Norway, but from Ireland, Germany, Italy but none who were born here.

**Janet:** Is there anything else that you would like to say about having been stationed here?

**Knud:** It was a great place to be stationed. I can’t believe that I didn’t more pictures when I was here, but it was very good duty. I enjoyed being here. I enjoyed the harbor. I had really wonderful almost two years here.

**Janet:** Have you maintained your interests in boats and the water?

**Knud:** Somewhat but never really acted on. I do some white water in rubber kayaks stuff with actual boating.

**Janet:** How about engines?

**Knud:** Loan mowers and stuff like that I tinker with. For a time I used to tinker with my own car engines but now they are so complicated. I leave that to the professionals.

**Janet:** I want to thank you so much for a most interesting interview. I’ve speaking with Knud Hansen. It’s October 13th, 1995. We are here at Ellis Island Oral History Studio. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I’m signing off.