**Paul:** Good morning. This is Paul Seacrest for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, August 15th 1995. I’m up at the recording studio at Ellis Island with Vincent Wixted. Mr. Wixted was in the Coast Guard for four months here at Ellis Island in 1953. Can we begin please by you giving me your full name?

**Vincent:** My full name is Vincent de Paul Wixted Junior.

**Paul:** And your birth date please?

**Vincent:** January 16th 1931.

**Paul:** Give me a little bit of family background. Tell about a little bit about your parents and where they came from.

**Vincent:** Originally, from what I could find out, the family is Pennsylvania Dutch. My mother’s people came from Germany; my father’s people came from Ireland. To me I have an English name. They came over right at the time of the potato famine in the middle 1800s. That was how we got here.

**Paul:** Where did you grow up?

**Vincent:** I grew up in Pennsylvania.

**Paul:** Tell me a little bit about your growing up.

**Vincent:** I was the average Depression baby, to get that in there for the time period, and then once the war started everything was on a war footing; schools, kids, did our things. We’d run around and get rubber and save rubbers and tin cans until the war was over.

Even in school they had us do various things that helped the war effort; even if it was to go out in the shop, even for sixth grade junior high school students to make models for the Air force. Then they would give us a little recommendation and say thank you for the work we did for them.

After that when I got to high school I took electronics. I was really going to be a whizz kid but you know how that goes. Afterwards I really didn’t know what I wanted to do but then unfortunately the Korean War came along so I thought I should go but I didn’t know where I wanted to go, and I decided on the Coast Guard and eventually I wound up here.

**Paul:** When you were a kid how did you think about the military? How did you perceive the military? Because it was war time; it was World War Two.

**Vincent:** I thought it was a good thing probably because my father was in the National Guard and him being in the Boy Scouts everything was kind of a military thing. Most of my uncles and my older cousins were all in the CCC so everything was kind of military footing starting from the Depression, which we all thought was a good thing for all this WPA stuff and everything they had going.

**Paul:** Tell me how you initially got into the Coast Guard. What’s the process? How does one become a member of the Coast Guard?

**Vincent:** I started as a naval reservist and I had been to sea but then when the Korean War came along I decided I wasn’t part of that so I thought I would switch services. I had travel about 80 miles from where I live over to Wilkes- Barre, Pennsylvania where they had a recruiting station to sign up.

Told them that I wanted to get in, I wanted to enlist so then they told me to wait and come back, gave me a little time limit; I think it was a month or so, to come back. Then on December 7th 1950 I was sworn in in Wilkes-Barre but that was only at the recruiting station and that was your last chance if you didn’t want to go. After that, with the processing and paperwork, they put you on a train, you went to California to boot camp. We went out to Alameda.

**Paul:** Alameda was where the boot camp was?

**Vincent:** At that time; there was Alameda and Cape May in New Jersey. Alameda is in California though, just below San Francisco on the bay. Once we were out there they started. It was just a regular regulation boot camp just like the Navy went through the same process and we were sworn in again when we got there to make sure we were going to stay and then we started our 13 weeks training period.

**Paul:** What kinds of things did you learn in boot camp?

**Vincent:** Some stuff I had picked up but we still had to learn how to march, how to work as a unit. Primarily it’s regimentation so a group of people can work together as a unit. It was still the march, salute, how to take care of your uniforms, how to maintain your clothing, how to keep on a strict schedule.

**Paul:** Any special training? Special skills?

**Vincent:** No, not at that time because they wanted to make sure everybody is in a state of physical fitness and regimentation, so that everybody can work as a unit. After you leave boot camp then to become assigned to a unit after taking a lot of tests to see what you’re best suited for, then you’re assigned to a unit some place in the country after you leave.

**Paul:** Tell me just quickly how you ended up at Ellis Island.

**Vincent:** While the Korean War ended, I’d been on the Cutter Spencer for over two years. I was working on the third year and I think I had asked for a transfer for some reason. I was trying to get to go to school at the time. I asked for a transfer and they all of a sudden decided to approve it and since I had a short time I think that’s why they sent me over here.

**Paul:** Tell me about what you remember about the first day that you were here.

**Vincent:** That was fun. I started out from Staten Island. You were a Coast Guard based at St. George. That was where the ship pulled in on a Saturday morning August 15th 1953. I had my orders and my sea bag was packed and they told me I was to come over here. I wasn’t quite sure about how to get over here but I knew the patrol boats were over here so I went up to the patrol boat office to find out if there was a boat coming over here, they told me yes. I asked them, “Could I get transportation?” They told me, “Sure, come along when they leave.” So I got a boat ride across New York Harbor to Ellis Island and we pulled in next to the ferry boat down here that was running at the time. That was how I wound up.

They wound up assigning me to the carpenter shop. I don’t know which sort of buildings you call that over there. Is it the port side or the ferry entrance? I was assigned there and at the same time I got married the very same day. It was a good thing they gave me liberty. Monday morning I had to be back to work. After that I did meet… there was more people here from the other units I had served on that I did meet that had previously been assigned.

**Paul:** You took the boat over to Ellis Island, you dumped your duffel bag down, and then you went somewhere else and got married?

**Vincent:** First day I had to get into the uniform of the day, go to my assigned station, make sure I had quarters, make sure I had an assignment, they gave me a job, then they decided since it was the weekend they gave me liberty. So I went and got married.

**Paul:** What was your wife’s name?

**Vincent:** My wife’s name was Doris.

**Paul:** And her maiden name?

**Vincent:** It was Doris Fay and she came from Long Island City, New York.

**Paul:** F-A-Y-E?

**Vincent:** No, just F-A-Y.

**Paul:** Describe for me your work in the carpenter shop.

**Vincent:** At the particular time my job was to head 40-foot patrol boats over here and occasionally for repair and we had a small repair [unclear 00:08:57] over here that could lift them. My job was to build boat [unclear 00:09:01] so we could sit out here on the, I won’t call it a pier, you have a sidewalk over there now outside the buildings but they used to hoist them up set it in there if they could do some preliminary repairs or some quickie stuff to make sure the boats were operational and then put them back in the water. They had a small [unclear 00:09:26] over here. We’d work on the ferry boat pilings to keep it maintained and make sure everything was operational over here.

**Paul:** Can you describe the inside of the carpenter shop for me?

**Vincent:** At thebottom part of the building there’s a long hallway that phases out to the ferry entrance and off of each side there were shops. Ours was the last shop at the end of the building next to the stairway. There is a set of stairs outside on the end of the building but ours was down below in kind of a subterranean thing and it was a regular very well set up carpenter shop with all the primary wood lathes, table saws, just as if you’d go into some carpenter shop out in a civilian world.

**Paul:** How many Coast Guards men worked in the carpenter shop?

**Vincent:** There was myself, there was a chief… I happened to be third class at the time, there was another third class; I think it was four of us that worked there.

**Paul:** Were there other responsibilities other than repairing the boats?

**Vincent:** There was a small fire Jeep here at that time.

**Paul:** Jeep? A small vehicle?

**Vincent:** A regular military Jeep that had been reconstructed to look like a little fire truck and as far as I know this is the only vehicle that was ever on this island besides the electric train they had for moving supplies and produce to get the food on because the ferry boat was too small.

The other duties we had was we would have regular military duty nights, we were still responsible for other people; none ratings and then if I remember correctly there was a movie hall out behind the building on the parade grounds. That’s between island two and three. We would get the duty which told you your responsible petty officer to take care of the movie hall to make sure everybody behaved themselves and keep the place clean. Everything was on a schedule.

**Paul:** How often would you see movies?

**Vincent:** They had movies every night at this particular time.

**Paul:** Is there an experience that sticks out in your mind about going to see a certain movie or something that happened?

**Vincent:** Not that way, it was just, “Hey, I’ve got to go there”, that’s all. These guys screaming hard for what the movie was.

**Paul:** Were you offered any live entertainment?

**Vincent:** I don’t think there was at that time but they were still having inter-service athletics at that time. They were still having baseball games, football games, whatever they could do on the field.

**Paul:** Did you participate?

**Vincent:** No. I didn’t even know they had it at that time because my previous assignments kept me at sea too much; we’re maybe on a ship that had boxing matches and maybe some volleyball if you had enough room to set up a net but we were usually going out at sea a lot on call so they didn’t always do it but boxing was a big thing.

**Paul:** Was boxing important here? Do you remember seeing any boxing at Ellis Island?

**Vincent:** I don’t remember any here. They could have had it though before I came. At that particular time whatever was on the schedule of activities for sports when I was here, because it was coming up to the fall season.

**Paul:** You came in August so you were here through December?

**Vincent:** Yes, till the beginning of December.

**Paul:** Can you describe for me where you slept? Not where it is but what it looked like.

**Vincent:** I’d have to go look at the rooms now over there to see. If I remember correctly we each had our own room. There was enough space in the buildings in certain sections of the buildings that you could still occupy. We had a regular type military cot, a dresser, and a closet. You really didn’t need a lot because you didn’t spend too much time there; only for sleeping hours or if you were going to study at night.

**Paul:** Was there a bathroom attached to that or where did you wash up?

**Vincent:** I really can’t remember now whether we had bathrooms in each room or there was like a shower room.

**Paul:** What about eating?

**Vincent:** We used to have a mess hall and there was a kitchen in the lower level of the building. There was a regular kitchen set up the cooks had and we had a dining room down on the lower level.

**Paul:** What times would you eat during the day?

**Vincent:** Seven o’clock in the morning have breakfast, noon time have the main meal and then usually about 4:30 in the afternoon you’d have late supper and then hope you got liberty so you can leave and go over to the big city.

**Paul:** If you got liberty, what would you do in New York?

**Vincent:** At that particular time I was married so I would go over to see my wife.

**Paul:** Where was she living?

**Vincent:** At that time we were living in Long Island City; that would wind up being just at the end of 59th Street Bridge.

**Paul:** How would you get in to Manhattan from Ellis Island?

**Vincent:** They had a small ferry boat. I think it had a diesel engine in it. It had a pillar type thing. It looked just like a miniature ferry boat though; just like the Staten Island Ferry but it was a lot smaller. They used to have a regular schedule from here over to Lower Manhattan, to the MIO Building right next to Staten Island Ferry terminal was where they used to pull in and leave from. And occasionally if it broke down they’d send us over. We’d wind up on a third boat that would leave from the same place.

**Paul:** Do you remember how late the ferry ran at night?

**Vincent:** That I don’t recall because this place was operational, customs people were in and out of here all the time so I don’t know whether they really stopped or not.

**Paul:** Did you have any interaction with the immigration side of what was going on here? Or do you remember seeing anyone?

**Vincent:** Not in my particular job. I remember seeing people come and go and the ferry boat would come in and you would see US Marshalls or custom people per se, but they would show up with a lot of people, people would be processed or people that just came off some of the ships they came in and they would bring them over for processing.

I used to see people in the other buildings and then when I asked about it, it was either people that they thought were sick that they wanted to have a medical check-up before they went into the city. They have some kind of a deposition for what they were going to do medically or there were some detainees that they were going to deport. That is what they told me. This was quite an active place at that time before it closed.

**Paul:** Did you receive any special training here in something? Some skill that you learnt in the four months that you were here?

**Vincent:** I don’t think it was necessary at that time when I came over for what my particular job was. They had people on the patrol boats and as long as the patrol boats were operational and if there’s any small thing to be repaired, I took care of it. Mainly that was my job; as a metal [unclear 00:18:26] then it would be because they had the aluminium boats then.

**Paul:** Would you have participated in any drills while you were here of any sorts?

**Vincent:** We had fire drills a lot.

**Paul:** What does that entail?

**Vincent:** They would pick on a part of the building that they would use for a fire drill. I don’t know whether that involved the civilian people that were here or not. I believe the customs people took care of that and the maintenance people on the customs side of the island. But we would have drills over there because we had this fire Jeep that was always... that thing always had to run, it always had to work, it even had a water pump on it, hoses, a short ladder so we could still get up there three storeys for the buildings.

They would run around and have quite a fire drill; stop everything dead, everybody would go get this little Jeep around, make sure it worked rounds for water, go through a regular drill just as if it was a house on fire.

**Paul:** Do you remember any kind of serious problem happening while you were here in those four months?

**Vincent:** The only serious problem to me was when the ferry boat didn’t run right and it wouldn’t be operational. We had to take the third boat back and forth. That’s what everybody worried about. That was quite our biggest concern but we were very… it wouldn’t be interactive but we had good rapport with the maintenance people on the island so if they needed something at the time and we had it we could go back and forth and work together. Or if they didn’t have enough people and something happened at that time we could give them a little assistance or it would be the other way around.

**Paul:** Do you remember a specific incident where you were assisting the maintenance people on the island?

**Vincent:** Something happened on the back side of the island. A pride of fence fell down and we had to put it back up because I recall it used to be two high, I believe they were 12 foot, chain link fences. One was on the outside of the wall, then there was a walk way down the middle of that, and then there was another fence just as if a prison yard. There were some silly people that decided they didn’t want to stay here and they didn’t want to get deported and they wanted to swim to New Jersey. That was because there was no bridge out there at that time.

It was surrounded by water and the patrol boats would even go out there. But they would try to swim as soon as they found out somebody left or somebody was missing or they saw somebody out there in the water they’d send a boat around and they usually didn’t quite make it. They’d get at it because there was a nasty current out there.

**Paul:** Are there any incidences that stick out in your mind where bodies were found in the harbor during your four months here?

**Vincent:** No I don’t remember any over here. Or else at that time that would have been the patrol boats that would have wound up doing that, but there had been in other parts of the harbor I remember.

**Paul:** What about medical facilities? For instance, if you slammed your finger what would happen? Where would you go and how would you be treated?

**Vincent:** I think at that time we had our own small medical office on the island in our particular area so we could keep separated from the customs department if it came that bad. If not, we’d wind up going to the marine hospital in Staten Island.

**Paul:** Did anything like that happen to you?

**Vincent:** No. I was lucky.

**Paul:** What about to any of your friends?

**Vincent:** One of the other fellows smashed his hand; something kind of nasty did happen to him. I don’t recall just why but as far as I know they put him on a patrol boat and went. That was the easiest way to get across the harbor at that time.

**Paul:** So it wasn’t pretty here as…?

**Vincent:** They would do a preliminary thing, a triage, then put them on a boat and take them to Staten Island.

**Paul:** Do any of your officers stick out in your mind for any reason? Or colleagues in general. Was there somebody that you served with that really sticks?

**Vincent:** They stick out but I can’t remember their names.

**Paul:** That’s alright but tell me why they stick out.

**Vincent:** The chief I worked for, I believe it was the end of September October, one of these northeaster storms where the water rises in the harbor and it comes back. The water used to wash over the sea wall here. We were here and when we came down to go to work one morning, the basement was full of water so we couldn’t even get to the shops. And here comes the chief in a little row boat, I don’t know where he got that from, but he’s rowing through the hallway to see what condition his working area is in. That was the silliest thing and I always remember that. Every time they talk about a north east storm up here they always talk about the water level rising and coming through the sea walls either here or in Manhattan or the surrounding islands, this I always remember.

**Paul:** Any other Coast Guards men that stick out in your mind or a buddy that you used to do something with?

**Vincent:** Not really because at the end of the day when my job was over, if I had liberty, it was home. I was a new married person and that was the bigger thing.

**Paul:** Did you ever get your wife out here?

**Vincent:** No. I tried to get her to come and she wouldn’t come. That’s why I was trying to come on the 40th anniversary was to bring her over to the island since it was restored and I could show her where I was, where I wound up, and possibly what I was doing when we first got married but unfortunately it didn’t work out.

**Paul:** But in 1953 you didn’t bring her out here?

**Vincent:** No.

**Paul:** Were you allowed to have visitors out here?

**Vincent:** I really don’t recall. I don’t think anybody had any dependents over here. It was strictly the service people that were here.

**Paul:** I was just wondering if they allowed you to bring people out if you wanted to.

**Vincent:** I never bothered to ask. Maybe if I’d asked they gave me permission but it’d probably only been for the day anyway but I really don’t think so. I don’t think it would be an appropriate thing at the time for what the island’s operation was.

**Paul:** Did you participate in any instruction taught in a class room anywhere?

**Vincent:** No. It was strictly my shop job and what my rating pertained to.

**Paul:** Were you required to do any matching on the island having learned it at boot camp?

**Vincent:** We had morning master outback in the [unclear 00:26:04].

**Paul:** Describe to me what morning master is.

**Vincent:** Every morning as long as long as you had duty after breakfast, say eight o’clock when the flag goes up, we’d all master out and back stand in big lines like two areas of corn and the bosun would check everybody that was supposed to be there in our particular group to make sure all those people was here that was assigned here unless somebody was sick or somebody had to leave; to make sure he had the right number of people really. It’s still more or less a military operation completely.

**Paul:** It’s like taking roll call?

**Vincent:** Yes, he’s taking roll call.

**Paul:** Then did you have to…?

**Vincent:** Then we would start. If the train was here, the groceries came in on the ferry boat then we [unclear 00:26:59] down to the storage area for the kitchen and help unload the food stuffs and make sure everything was put away. If we had material coming over to work on our shop we’d have to take care of that.

**Paul:** Tell me about this electric train. I’ve never heard anyone describe it before. The food came on the little ferry boat on the Ellis Island ferry?

**Vincent:** It looks like the thing they have at the airport to carry the baggage around. That’s what it looked like.

**Paul:** Where was it exactly?

**Vincent:** I don’t know where they kept it.

**Paul:** Did it run on track?

**Vincent:** No, it didn’t run on track. It was wheeled train and there was three cars, they’re probably 10 foot long, say 10 by 4 each car, and it was electric motor driven mule probably the same dimension but with an electric motor. They’d hook it all up, had like solid rubber tyres on it so it was easy to get on the ferry boat and off. We could take the Jeep on the ferry boat. That was the only thing it would fit.

**Paul:** It was used for what? It was used for groceries…

**Vincent:** For general moving of materials. It was kind of a carry- all.

**Paul:** Did it have a driver as such?

**Vincent:** Yes they had a driver. It just didn’t go by itself. It reminds you of moving the bags at the airport; that kind of a baggage train. It was really similar. They had probably come up with that probably about the same time they started moving baggage out of, say La Guardia. I think they were just working on JFK then; I don’t think it was finished yet.

**Paul:** When you look back on your days in the Coast Guard, how do you see them now? How do you think of your days in the Coast Guard?

**Vincent:** It was an adventure. It was different; there was a lot of good camaraderie. I learned a lot more things. The Coast Guard gave me a chance to do what I wanted to do. That’s the way I looked at it.

**Paul:** What was that? What was it that you wanted to do?

**Vincent:** I wanted to be an engineer and a mechanic. Other people told me, “Why don’t you be a cook or just go out and be an old deckhand and run a mop around all the time” but that isn’t really what they do either constantly. “Sounds good”, that’s what a lot of people say but the service has a lot of different ratings, a lot of different things to do and they did give me a chance to do what I wanted to do, and that was to be in engineering and really work on a whole ship. I managed to go through that and it gave me a chance to work in naval civil engineering then. I really enjoyed my job.

**Paul:** Tell me about the process of getting discharge at Ellis Island and what you had to go through. What did that entail?

**Vincent:** I don’t think it entailed too much. You had a separation date when your enlistment ended so you still had to be physically fit when you left because if you had a medical problem they’d keep you till it was reconciled. You still had to be in shape and then they would work on getting all this paperwork and assignments to make sure all your time was accounted for. You had proper rating; if you had medals it was to be given to you, of any kind. It used to seem like a lot of paperwork but it went quick because primarily the people in the office worked it up.

**Paul:** Did your routine change as your time was getting closer to the end on the island?

**Vincent:** Mine never did because I never tried to change it. I was doing the job I had and what my rating called for and like soldiers, kept working on it till I ran out of time and they said, “Tomorrow is your day, be in the office, sign your discharge papers”.

**Paul:** What did you wear when you left Ellis Island?

**Vincent:** We had our dress blue sailor suits.

**Paul:** Describe it in words please.

**Vincent:** Your travelling uniform was a set of dress blues that consisted of [unclear 00:32:23] uniform; a jumper, white collar, three stripes, a big silk tie tied in a square knot, bellbottom pants; not necessarily bell but it was straight-legged pants with 13 buttons on. You looked like you came from the Navy yard at that particular time and a Dixie cup hat.

**Paul:** Did you have multiple uniforms? Were there different kinds of uniforms for different activities?

**Vincent:** We had three kinds of uniform. It would be the same as what the Navy has now I believe, at that particular time. We had dungarees which they call denims now, for work. Then we had whites for the in summertime. There was still a jumper and a pair of white tough uniform. Actually it’s a heavy cotton and then you would still wear your [unclear 00:33:24] with it, and your dress blues. The uniforms worked the same; they were just different colors.

**Paul:** Were there inspections that you had to undergo when you were here? Like were you ever inspected to make sure your tie was on straight or anything like that?

**Vincent:** I really don’t recall because I always tried to be ready to go. I believe they always when we checked out to go on liberty when they said we could go on liberty. The officer of the day always checked us to make sure we looked great. If we didn’t we couldn’t go till we got straightened out or satisfied his wishes as far as uniform went.

He wanted us to be properly dressed and appropriate while we went ashore. That they always wanted and that I always tried to do. It looked like I just stepped out of the tailor shop or everything just came from the cleaners. You had to leave with a nice, clean uniform.

**Paul:** I’m curious about how your wife felt about being a newly-wed and not being able to live with her husband.

**Vincent:** We had it going together for a while so she knew that I was going to be coming and going all that time because she was still sitting over in the city while we were running up north on the ship anyway so she knew I was going to be gone and that I had duty days. Where so many days they would give me liberty if I deserved it, and then I would have duty days where I would have to stay here so she accepted that.

**Paul:** So you were discharged in December… and you were at Ellis Island about four months, tell us quickly what happened after that. Tell us about the course of your life in five minutes or less.

**Vincent:** I was going back home to Pennsylvania. I didn’t know precisely what I was going to do but then I decided I should go to school and go back for architectural drafting. But in the end, when I couldn’t find a lot of good jobs, I feel there are million people that got discharged from the service about the same time. Everybody seemed dissatisfied. Everybody was trying to go back to school so there was a lot of ex GIs in school taking courses.

I don’t know for whatever reason but after a couple of semesters I became dissatisfied so I decided maybe I should just go back into service because I liked it and it got to the point I missed it; probably the regimentation, the camaraderie again, and the things I was doing I was doing things I liked, so I decided I should re-enlist and stay and we came back to the city.

**Paul:** So you went back into the Coast Guards?

**Vincent:** I went back into the Coast Guard again.

**Paul:** How long did you stay in the Coast Guard?

**Vincent:** I stayed long enough to retire. I stayed until 1972.

**Paul:** What was your rank in 1972?

**Vincent:** I was chief petty officer.

**Paul:** What did you start off as?

**Vincent:** A seaman recruit in boot camp.

**Paul:** That’s interesting. So you actually chose it as a career?

**Vincent:** Yes I made a career out of it.

**Paul:** Did you ever have an opportunity, before now, to come back to Ellis Island where you were while you were still in the Coast Guard for any reason?

**Vincent:** No because the island was closed at that time and that was before they even started to renovate the place. I probably retired before you started renovations. I’m not even sure what year that was.

**Paul:** They started doing renovations in ’83 but they actually started giving tours in the early 70s.

**Vincent:** Because then I heard about it; “We’re going to renovate the island”, and I think they were already working on the Statue of Liberty.

**Paul:** Now I see why the Coast Guard mean so much to you; you spent your whole life in that institution.

**Vincent:** This was just the tail-end of my first enlistment in the Coast Guard but I thought it would be nice to come back, show my kids where we started out and parts of places I started out because before that, I was on the weather ships, the big cutters so up to that point that’s where I spent my whole first stage.

**Paul:** And that’s another oral history project all together.

**Vincent:** Yes, that’s a whole other thing. What is in the history books and there’s a lot of stuff you can find in libraries. I even found interesting books in the school library for Ellis Island that had a very good coverage. I was really surprised to find it because I didn’t think they had one that much in-depth for as late as they did go, because they did cover the time period after the renovations started. They do show you.

**Paul:** I want to thank you very much for coming up and letting me ask you some questions about being in the Coast Guard here at Ellis Island. The description of the train is very interesting. As I said, we’ve not heard that before.

**Vincent:** Maybe if you go and look in one of the buildings you might find it.

**Paul:** This is Paul Seacrest signing off with Vincent Wixted on Tuesday, August 15th 1995 here at the Ellis Island recording studio. Thank you.

**Vincent:** And thank you.