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Alfred Arberg
February 1, 2002

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September 11, 2001
Oral History Documentation Project
Northeast Region, National Park Service

INTERVIEWEE: Alfred Arberg
Boat Captain
Statue of Liberty National Monument
(Interview No. 31)

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INTERVIEW DATE: February 1, 2002

PLACE: Ellis Island
Statue of Liberty National Monument

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START OF TAPE

Mark Schoepfle: — and Mark Schoepfle on February 1, 2002.

Mark Schoepfle: Well, Al, my first question — I'm going to start off with — from the moment you were first aware that something had happened, what went on?

Alfred Arberg: Well, I was downstairs doing an oil change on one of my generators. When I come upstairs and my deckhand, Larry, he said, "Al, a plane hit one of the buildings." And from where we were sitting at the Marine Inspection Office, all we could see was smoke over the top of these big buildings.

Alfred Arberg: So, I guess it was about a little after nine. I was getting underway to come to Ellis Island, and I pulled out of MIO and I happened to notice that it was the north tower of the World Trade Center. So, I'm heading up a little north towards Castle Clinton, and from the corner of my eye I happen to see this other plane come over the Statue of Liberty and he's flying really low. And I wasn't aware that we were under attack.

Alfred Arberg: I'm just saying, "Why is this guy coming this way and he's so low?" And I'm thinking to myself, you know, this is strange. What, is he going to go take pictures or something? This is my idea. Well, you know, and then I see him bank the plane. I'm saying to myself: "What? Is he going to go in between the buildings?" And bam, I saw him go right into the second tower. With that, I don't know what I can say about it. I was in awe, you know. Everybody was dumbstruck. We didn't know what was going on, you know. And we figured we were under attack because of that.

Alfred Arberg: So, I'm going back out to Ellis Island and I get a call from the lieutenant, and he goes: "Al, go over to Statue of Liberty. We're going to evacuate the islands." So, I went over to the island. I took the people on the boat that was with me. They were going to get off. Some of them were going to get off at Ellis, but they was told to stay on the boat and go home. I picked up people at Liberty, went over to Ellis, picked up what we could get on the boat there, and I took them back to New York.

Alfred Arberg: Came back to Ellis, and with that they were going to start setting up triage, I think it was, over here at Ellis, and I had some more people to bring back over to New York. And it was about, I guess, maybe about a dozen people I was going to bring back. And Jim Watkins was up here in the wheelhouse with me, and he's the budget analyst here at Ellis Island, and we're heading back into Manhattan. I get about three-quarters of the way in when the second tower collapsed, and we seen all the smoke coming down. It was rolling, like rolling right down Manhattan through the streets and everything else.

- Alfred Arberg: And I says, “you know, I can’t drop anybody off in Manhattan with the smoke.” I turned around and brought everybody back to Ellis Island.
- Alfred Arberg: And then my boss, Pete O’Dougherty, he’s the chief of maintenance, he said, “well, Al, we’ll put Liberty IV back into its berth over here at Ellis and we’ll pick up Liberty II.” And we were going to because it’s wide open in the front and just in case they had to put gurneys on the boat. So, we jumped on Liberty II, and Pete and Gene, one of the EMTs, and Ray Hammond, one of the Rangers, they get on the boat and we proceeded to go into Manhattan.
- Alfred Arberg: By the time we got there, there was every boat in the world at the Battery up by Battery Park City. They were picking people up and taking them wherever they were taking them. So, we saw a police boat and we said to him well, where would you need us. And he said, well, just stand by because you can’t get in there right now. And we stood by for about a half-hour, and then there were so many boats there they didn’t need us, so we came back to Ellis Island.
- Alfred Arberg: And then, let’s see. Wow, we stayed here for a few hours. And then later on in the evening, my boss and Frank Mills, the deputy superintendent, get on a boat and we had a bunch of people that I had to go and drop them off under the Brooklyn Bridge.
- Mark Schoepfle: I’m sorry. Who were these again?
- Alfred Arberg: Mike Kartanowicz and Frank Mills, he’s the deputy superintendent.
- Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.
- Alfred Arberg: Mike is my boss. He’s a supervisory captain. In fact, he was involved with this too because he got commandeered from the fire department with Liberty III, and he was bringing people back and forth with all the firemen — back and forth to — up to the North Shore Marina. That’s where the financial center is. So, he was bringing firemen back and forth all day long for about three or four hours.
- Alfred Arberg: Anyway, we went back and then he got on a boat, and he says, Al, I want to drop them off over at the Brooklyn Bridge. Then I want you to go up the North River. We’ll drop them off by the Circle Line, 42nd Street. And as we’re coming back, he says, “well, Al, what do you want to do? Do you want to try to go home?” I guess it was about 7 o’clock at night, I guess, and I says, “yeah, I’ll try,” but everything was so blacked out.

- Alfred Arberg: I got back to New York. I got to my car, and all the debris from the financial center and everything was all over the car and everything. So, I wiped it off the glass and proceeded to go down Water Street to go to the Brooklyn Bridge. I go down there and — well, there was a lieutenant with the NYPD there with stanchions up. Nobody was allowed on the Brooklyn Bridge. And I told him who I was, and he opened up the stanchions and he let me go across the Brooklyn Bridge. I was the only car on the Brooklyn Bridge, and it felt really eerie.
- Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.
- Alfred Arberg: But I did happen to see people staggering, straggling, walking across the bridge right on the pavement of the bridge. And that's all I can say on the issue. That's all I can — that's all I have. I was off the next couple of days because I couldn't get into New York. Everything going westbound — I live in Long Island — going west was closed. They didn't want anybody coming into the city.
- Alfred Arberg: When I finally did get to come to the city, we used to keep the boat in New York and now we keep it at Ellis. I had to take the Verrazano Bridge and the Bayonne Bridge just to get to work. So, I had to drive all the way around and pay a lot of tolls.
- Mark Schoepfle: No kidding. What, about 13 bucks, if I'm not mistaken?
- Alfred Arberg: And that was five days a week I was on it, you know.
- Alfred Arberg: And we went — every day I came here you could smell it, you know. If the wind was right, you could — the smell was real bad. And that's about it.
- Mark Schoepfle: Well, what happened in the days after that? If I can go through —
- Alfred Arberg: Well, the last couple of days, well, we had just our staff coming to work and everybody just coming to work. That was all they were doing. There was nobody — there was no customers or any people here for interp [interpretation staff] or anybody to watch. But everything was pretty much secure over here, you know. We had plenty of water to drink. The Coast Guard had water at New York. Everybody had water, you know. So that was good.
- Alfred Arberg: But like I said, the smell every time I come in, you know. We had the security over at Ellis Island where they would go through your car. And they had the bomb-sniffing dogs — would go around the car and the other guys would go under with a mirror just to make sure nobody would put anything — any bombs or anything else — in your car because you're coming out to —

- Mark Schoepfle: What about the boats? Are they more secure here?
- Alfred Arberg: The boat stayed here at Ellis. We — this boat used to stay in Manhattan all the time. Now they have it over here at Ellis. And when I go — when I work the day shift, I drive around. But at night shift, I come in through New York. And then after my last run at night, the park police boat picks me and my deck hand up and he takes us over to Manhattan so we can go home.
- Mark Schoepfle: Okay. A couple of questions to back up. Remember I have no background with the park or anything like that.
- Alfred Arberg: Right.
- Mark Schoepfle: What kind of boats have we got here? How many? What kind of boats are they? What are their names? That sort of thing.
- Alfred Arberg: Well, we have the Liberty II, Liberty III, and Liberty IV. Liberty II is mainly for garbage hauling, because it's all wide open, the deck. It's an old — there's one little 671 engine in it. And they haul garbage from Liberty Island, Ellis Island to over here in the back here by the fuel dock. They have dumpsters and they have pick-up here and they have an incinerator here also.
- Alfred Arberg: Liberty III is like a backup to this boat, Liberty IV. And sometimes they use Liberty III for garbage too, and not too much. But like I said, it's a backup for this boat.
- Alfred Arberg: And then this is Liberty IV. It's 64 feet, 84 tons, and she's got 1400 horsepower. And this is mainly for bringing the staff over to both islands and VIPs and what have you. In fact, we had the President on the boat in July. And so, this is the main boat. And we're looking to get another one if they'll give us one.
- Mark Schoepfle: So, I mean, does this one — does it run at full capacity?
- Alfred Arberg: This boat?
- Mark Schoepfle: I mean, when this thing runs, is everybody on it?
- Alfred Arberg: Well, it holds 80 people. Liberty III hauls 49. Liberty II, like I said, we only haul garbage, and that's strictly garbage, Liberty II.
- Mark Schoepfle: Strictly garbage.
- Alfred Arberg: Yeah, strictly garbage.
- Mark Schoepfle: Strictly garbage.
- Alfred Arberg: That's about it.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. When we're looking back on this whole thing —

Alfred Arberg: Right.

Mark Schoepfle: — because actually there was quite a bit going on here.

Mark Schoepfle: You were changing the oil on the generator at — and you mentioned where, but I didn't —

Alfred Arberg: Well, it's at 8 o'clock — like from 8 o'clock I'm back here, like 10 after 8 from my 7:30 run. And sometimes I go for a walk. I'll go down towards the Trade Center, up Broadway, and come down because I don't get too much to walk, you know. That's the only exercise I get to do. That day I decided to do an oil change instead.

Mark Schoepfle: Instead of the walk?

Alfred Arberg: Because I was a little bit later than usual and I would have never made it back in time. I probably would have never made it back if I would have went on the walk, because I walk right alongside there, you know. Anyway —

Mark Schoepfle: And where was this? Which port was this at?

Alfred Arberg: I'm at MIO. That's called the Marine Inspection Office.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. And where is that located?

Alfred Arberg: That's in Manhattan.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. So that's in Manhattan.

Alfred Arberg: Next to the Staten Island Ferry Terminal.

Mark Schoepfle: Got it. Okay.

Alfred Arberg: Yeah. I just decided, let me do an oil change.

Alfred Arberg: I had no idea what was going on when I came up. Larry, my deck hand, he said, "Al, a plane hit a building;" and I come up. All I seen was the smoke, because I had two big buildings in front of me and I can't see the Trade Center from here, from that particular point. And all I see is the smoke. So, I don't even know it was the Trade Center until I backed out and started up heading towards the north and I'm coming over to Ellis and I just said wow. It was the north tower. And I was like flabbergasted.

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: And from, like I said, I was inching my way up a little bit further north to see what was going on, and from the corner of my eye I happened to see that other plane. And there was this other guy, I think we had some people on the island that said the plane went right over the statue also. I don't know if you spoke to anybody, but —

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: — I happened to see it from the corner of my eye because I'm driving like this and I'm looking out this window. I'm looking over here at the Trade Center. I'm looking — I'm doing one of these — saying — what the heck is — where the heck is he going, you know?

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: It was like it was eerie. I didn't know where he was — I didn't know what was going on, because we didn't know that we were under attack.

Mark Schoepfle: Right.

Alfred Arberg: We thought it was just a plane that made a wrong turn, you know, or something happened. That's all we knew until the second one hit. Then we, you know —

Mark Schoepfle: So, you were bringing Liberty IV in here?

Alfred Arberg: Right.

Mark Schoepfle: And you got in, and you got over to Ellis — Was it Liberty or Ellis Island first?

Alfred Arberg: We were supposed to go to Ellis first, but they told us not to go to Ellis. They wanted to evacuate Liberty Island and then come to Ellis to get the rest of the people.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. It's MIO to Liberty —

Alfred Arberg: Right, to Ellis.

Mark Schoepfle: — to Ellis.

Alfred Arberg: Usually it's the other way around because we go to MIO, Ellis, Liberty, and then back to Ellis. But since we were evacuating, they wanted to get everybody off the islands as fast as possible, and that's what we did. We took Liberty and then Ellis, and then I dropped everybody off at Manhattan and then scooted back here.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. So, you came back, then dropped them off back at MIO?

Alfred Arberg: Uh-huh.

Mark Schoepfle: And then came back over here?

Alfred Arberg: Right.

Mark Schoepfle: All right. Were you bringing any — I gathered you were saying that it was — and I've got to look at my list here — that there were other people. It was Mike, I think, that was bringing the —

Alfred Arberg: He had Liberty III out.

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: And he got — he was bringing people out — back into Manhattan also, and when he got to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, I believe, the fire department commandeered him and they told him, "you're with us now," you know.

Mark Schoepfle: And so, he was bringing in injured people into Ellis Island here?

Alfred Arberg: No. I don't know how they got here. How did the injured people get here? I don't even know. I know we never had any on a boat.

Mark Schoepfle: Uh-huh.

Alfred Arberg: I know there was a few here. It might have been the park police might have brought them over.

Mark Schoepfle: So, the park police boat —

Alfred Arberg: They're the ones that brought them over, you know.

Mark Schoepfle: Uh-huh.

Alfred Arberg: Of course, I didn't — I had nobody on the boat that was hurt or injured or anything.

Mark Schoepfle: Uh-huh.

Alfred Arberg: That's what we were supposed to do, but we never did get in there because there were so many other boats over there from all over the harbor.

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: You know, by the time we got over there, all the fast boats were there. Because Liberty II is very slow.

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: But since she was wide open, Pete wanted — instead of using this boat, because you can hardly get a gurney down the side here —

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: — because it's very narrow.

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: So, it was wide open. The other boat he would want to have, you know, you can get as many people as you want on a wide-open boat, you know.

Mark Schoepfle: Right. So, if there had been a real emergency you could really pack that thing up.

Alfred Arberg: Yeah. You could put them on.

Mark Schoepfle: Because you were saying this one holds about 80 maximum, right?

Alfred Arberg: That holds less but it's all wide open so you can get gurneys on there and everything else.

Mark Schoepfle: You can get gurneys and all sorts of different kind of stuff there.

Alfred Arberg: Right. We put equipment on that boat and everything else too.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. So, you dropped everybody off at Battery Park and you came back to Ellis Island and you waited here for quite some time. Is that right?

Alfred Arberg: Quite a while. Just before — it was like, I'd say five minutes before the second — the collapse of the second — actually it's the second tower two collapsed first. It was five minutes before tower two collapsed is when I was bringing people back to New York. And like I said, when it collapsed, and all that smoke and debris was rolling down Manhattan streets and through the parking lots and people were jumping — actually people were jumping off the dock over at the Battery Park. They were in the water over there because of the smoke and everything —

Mark Schoepfle: Well, I didn't realize that.

Alfred Arberg: Yes, because a couple of days later, I forgot — I just remembered one of the National Guardsmen come up with this oriental fellow who happened to be in the water, but he had dropped —

Alfred Arberg: — he threw his bag on the dock. So, they came over, looking for the bag, and sure enough the bag was still on the dock.

Mark Schoepfle: Uh-huh.

Alfred Arberg: But he was in the water.

Mark Schoepfle: His friend was in the water off of there. Was he okay?

Alfred Arberg: Yeah. He was fine. Yes. He was okay but just wet.

Mark Schoepfle: Just wet.

Alfred Arberg: But there was a lot of people in the water. I didn't see them, but I heard that there was a lot of people that went in the water over there.

Mark Schoepfle: No kidding.

Alfred Arberg: They were climbing over the fences and everything else, you know.

Mark Schoepfle: Well, what happened when this great big bunch of ash — I mean, it just totally engulfed the boat, right?

Alfred Arberg: It just — no.

Mark Schoepfle: What did you see?

Alfred Arberg: I came — I was three-quarters of the way in. I turned around and came back here real quick.

Mark Schoepfle: You didn't even want to mess with it.

Alfred Arberg: No, because I couldn't drop — what, was I going to drop these people off? They'll be right in the middle of it. I had to turn around and just get them out of there, you know.

Mark Schoepfle: I see.

Alfred Arberg: I didn't want to drop them off because they would have been in the middle of this smoke and who knows what would have happened to them, you know?

Mark Schoepfle: So, you had — these were staff people you had on there. So, you just flat brought them back up here. They stayed for a while.

Alfred Arberg: I just brought them back. Yeah. Oh, yeah. Jim Walker is the budget analyst. He tried to go home with Mike, and he got commandeered with the Liberty III. And then he came — finally he got home with us so I had to drop him off by the Brooklyn Bridge. I don't know if you know Jim. He's the budget analyst here.

Mark Schoepfle: I didn't have a chance to meet him.

Alfred Arberg: And he — I dropped them under the Brooklyn Bridge there. Right under the Brooklyn Bridge, there was a little place to drop them off, and boom, they jumped off the boat. There was about ten of them, I guess. And then the other people had to — some people had to go up to the north. So, I took them up to where the Circle Line ferries go around the island. What is it, 42nd Street?

Mark Schoepfle: Forty-second Street.

Alfred Arberg: And right there. And then there was another one, I guess about a block from the Intrepid I dropped them off, you know.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. This was just around the time of the second tower collapsing?

Alfred Arberg: That's right. Exactly. Because I was five minutes coming in and it takes me about seven minutes. So, by the time I got five minutes in, that's when she collapsed.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. Ellis Island. So, you went, dropped people back at Ellis Island, picked a few of them up the best you could, got them off at 42nd Street?

Alfred Arberg: No. No. That was later on in the evening.

Mark Schoepfle: Later on, in the evening.

Alfred Arberg: Later on, yeah. Because we had to go —

Mark Schoepfle: Oh, I'm sorry. You're right.

Alfred Arberg: Because we picked up Liberty II, and we went in there with Liberty II and couldn't get anybody on the boat because there were so many other boats there —

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: — that they really didn't need us, you know?

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: Because they were more equipped — they had every boat you could imagine was in there. Everybody was — it was so great to see people working together, you know.

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

Alfred Arberg: Otherwise, they're cursing at you on the radio. So that's about all I can tell you on that.

Mark Schoepfle: Well, what was the communication like on the radio? I mean, what kind of requests were you getting? What kind of communication? How much info were you getting?

Alfred Arberg: We weren't getting much at all. Our information was strictly through the park police and they were — they took over everything here. Like I said, my boss, Pete O'Dougherty, chief of maintenance, that's when he decided to switch boats and try to go in with the Liberty II. But otherwise, the park police was in charge of everything, security and everything else around here, you know.

- Alfred Arberg: And then when it was time to bring people back that's who we got the information from, the park police. Okay, we want you to take these people back. And then like Frank Mills, he was the deputy superintendent, him and my boss, Mike Kartanowicz.
- Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.
- Alfred Arberg: They were the last ones with me on this boat. That's when they told me, "do you want to try and go home since we're in Manhattan?" I said, "sure, I'll try," and sure enough.
- Mark Schoepfle: So, you docked at MIO and then —
- Alfred Arberg: They dropped me off, and then they went back here. And then I got in my car and getting back into — going over the Brooklyn Bridge was so eerie because here I am the only car on the Brooklyn Bridge.
- Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.
- Alfred Arberg: That's — you're never the only car on the Brooklyn Bridge, especially since everything's blacked out too.
- Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.
- Alfred Arberg: And there's still all that smoke that you're in the middle of.
- Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.
- Alfred Arberg: And you drive, and your eyes are wide open, and you see people — you never see people walking on the Brooklyn Bridge, I mean actually on the bridge itself.
- Mark Schoepfle: That's right.
- Alfred Arberg: They have a walkway on the bridge, but these people were walking where I was driving.
- Mark Schoepfle: They were right in the —
- Alfred Arberg: Right in the — and I was like the only car on the bridge, and it was scary. It was eerie. It was eerie, scary. And once I got over there I got down through — I think it was Atlantic Avenue — and they detoured me this way and that way, and this way and that way. And I finally — I knew Brooklyn because I lived in Brooklyn most of my life, so I knew how to get around and get home, you know.
- Mark Schoepfle: Yeah.

- Alfred Arberg: But everything coming west, for two days I couldn't get to work because I couldn't get from Long Island. Everything was closed going westbound. You'd hit Brooklyn and get to Queens, but once you got to Brooklyn that was it, you know.
- Mark Schoepfle: You're cooked.
- Mark Schoepfle: All right. One last thing on that, just to make sure I got it all straight. You were waiting there at Ellis Island for quite a bit of the time during the afternoon?
- Alfred Arberg: Right.
- Mark Schoepfle: What did you all do while you were just waiting?
- Alfred Arberg: Well, we were getting fed. People were getting fed. I guess they were setting up triage. Most of what was being set up was triage over there.
- Mark Schoepfle: Uh-huh.
- Alfred Arberg: You know. They had some people —
- Mark Schoepfle: Were you all involved with that?
- Alfred Arberg: No. I was just — actually I was just there. I was just talking with some of the fellows here and there.
- Mark Schoepfle: Sure.
- Alfred Arberg: I was on Liberty IV. I did my other oil change that I had. I have two generators, so I finally got that done that day also. I was on Liberty IV. I did my other oil change that I had. I have two generators, so I finally got that done that day also.
- Mark Schoepfle: Sure. Sure. Put it to good use.
- Alfred Arberg: That's about it. But like I said, everybody was working together. We did have one little incident. While we were coming in, I was Liberty IV in the main slip. Liberty III was at the New York slip. That's the slip behind us. And a speedboat was coming towards Ellis Island, and everybody started screaming and started running all different ways. And I said, "what the heck is going on?" And then, I think it was the Coast Guard that cut them off. These people weren't supposed to be speeding around, around here by the islands. They thought it was another terrorist attack.
- Mark Schoepfle: Right.
- Alfred Arberg: That was that morning.
- Mark Schoepfle: Something like the USS Cole or something.

Alfred Arberg: Yeah. I have to leave here in one minute. I don't want to get stuck —

Mark Schoepfle: Well, look, I really appreciate your time on this. Is it possible for me to call you if I need some more information?

Alfred Arberg: Sure, yes.

Mark Schoepfle: Because I know — I just wanted to get a little more information like, as the time went on, on the — on the security and things like that. And I'll also be going through here to make sure I got the right kind of chronology all worked out and stuff like that.

Alfred Arberg: Yeah.

Mark Schoepfle: So, I can call you and maybe get some more information?

Alfred Arberg: Oh, sure. You call me right at home. I'm off Wednesdays and Thursdays right now.

Mark Schoepfle: Beautiful. Okay. Do I —

Alfred Arberg: Or early in the mornings, I'm here till like about 11:15 or so.

Mark Schoepfle: Let's make sure I've got that. Now this —

Alfred Arberg: That's my card. That's my home number here.

Mark Schoepfle: That's your home number. Okay.

Alfred Arberg: Right. That's home.

Mark Schoepfle: Okay. And when's the best time to call?

Alfred Arberg: I'm off Wednesdays and Thursdays, and you can catch me in the morning from like 9:00, 9:30 till about 11:30. I usually go for a walk down to Long Beach in the mornings.

Mark Schoepfle: Yeah. Because I'd also like to get, and it's important, I know this may sound trivial to you, but just to get an idea of even what your ordinary routine day was like. Because that way when somebody reads this —

Alfred Arberg: Oh, I can give you a schedule.

Mark Schoepfle: — they can get an idea. Well, that — that would be good.

END OF TAPE