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Robert Allen

Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Javier Arbona
in 2011

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Robert Allen

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Interview #1 September 8, 2011

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01-00:00:00

Arbona: Today is September 8, 2011. I'm here with Dr. Robert Allen. The interviewer is Javier Arbona. We're at UC Berkeley. This is tape one. We're going to be talking today about Port Chicago and Dr. Allen's career researching Port Chicago, the explosion, and the subsequent after effects of this explosion. We were just talking about, a little bit, the general outline, but I was going to ask you a more mundane question. Something that we usually do in all of these interviews. Just if you could give me your short summary of your life and your career. Where were you born?

01-00:01:00

Allen: Sure. Twenty-five words or less?

01-00:01:03

Arbona: Maybe a few more. Where you were born, how you came to Berkeley.

01-00:01:09

Allen: I'm from the South. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, May 29, 1942. Right at the outset of the war there. Although, of course, I had no connection with that, but, as it turns out, my father had actually tried to enlist during the war. I mention this in the book. He was rejected as being physically unfit. Now, my father was an amateur boxer. He was in the prime of life, completely fit. He just couldn't understand how he would be rejected, although apparently they say he had a heart murmur or something like that. That was a crushing experience for him, because his brothers all volunteered and he was going to join his four brothers, and he wanted to serve, but he did not have the opportunity. I think that was something that actually had a very bad influence on him, because it's like he never really recovered from that. It was some sort of psychological setback for him, which I don't quite fathom, but it had an enormous effect on him.

But in any case, I was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, and grew up in an African-American community there, which was, of course, segregated in a self-contained community. So I went to black schools, including Booker T. Washington High School. I actually left at the end of the tenth grade and went to Morehouse College. They had this special scholarship program for early-admit students who would come out of the tenth grade and into college with a scholarship. That was a very good thing, needless to say, because it paid my tuition at Morehouse, a very, very good school. I got a really top-notch education there. But this was at the time, the late fifties, with the development of the Civil Rights Movement. The Montgomery bus boycott had taken place. Demonstrations were taking place in other parts of the South at that time, including in Atlanta. As a Morehouse student, I got involved in some of the demonstrations. I was not a leader or anything like that, although some of the folks who had gone on to become leaders, like Julian Bond, were classmates.

They were a couple of years ahead of me at Morehouse. Julian Bond and Richard Hope and other folks.

Taking part in the movement had an enormous impact on me. I had come into college as a math and physics major. My plan was to become an astrophysicist. I didn't know there were not any black astrophysicists. Not that that would have made any difference, anyhow. But that's what I wanted to do. I partly came to this because of the influence of my father. My father was a mechanic, and he got me interested in how things work or don't work. He could fix just about everything. It was from him that I developed an interest in the natural world. In fact, one of the things I remember, when I was in elementary school, he gave me a high school science textbook, and I fell in love with it. Imagine, high school science textbook, one that was actually quite out of date, because that's what we were using. At the black schools, that's what we had, was the out-of-date textbooks. I fell in love with science, and so this is how I came to decide to major in math and physics at college.

But getting involved in the Civil Rights Movement at Morehouse and taking parts in demonstrations—we were having marches downtown then, too. Protests of lack of hiring of black people in the department stores downtown. Things of that sort. We had a local organization going then in Atlanta. So hundreds of students were involved from Morehouse and Spellman, and some white students came over, too, from the white schools on the other side of town, to take part in the demonstrations as well. It was very interesting. We had interracial demonstrations there in Atlanta, and we were all Southerners. There were no other people participating. It was interesting to see that, even at that time, there were white Southerners, young people, who were willing to take the risk of getting involved in the civil rights struggle. That was something that impressed me, because it made it clear that not all white people were racist, and not all people were opposed to equal treatment for African Americans, and some whites were willing to stand up and take a risk of putting their own lives on the line in support of our struggle. That was an important lesson to me.

But the overall lesson was one of becoming interested in how social movements work. How does society work? How does the social realm function? I was interested, in college, in the early years, in understanding the natural or the physical world, but now, with the Civil Rights Movement experience, I was more interested in looking at how the human world, the world of social relationships, works. In particular, what are social movements? How do they function? What role do they play? Not only the Civil Rights Movement at that moment, but also historically, because I knew there had been other movements that had taken place. The labor movement, the earlier struggles, the Garvey struggle, things of that sort. So I was interested in studying them, and that's what really pointed me in the direction that I eventually took, which was to get a degree in sociology. I finished my degree in math and physics at Morehouse. I went on to Columbia. At that

point, still in math and physics, but I was beginning by then to really seriously consider switching to the social sciences.

This is the middle sixties, so the Vietnam War is going on, and I got involved in the anti-war movement in New York, which seemed a natural outgrowth of being involved in the Civil Rights Movement. It was about justice, and it was about issues of race and racism because I looked at that war as a racist war, the Vietnam War as a colonial, racist war against people who were former colonial subjects themselves, and now being re-colonized by the United States. I was opposed to the war and became a draft resistor and eventually refused induction. I would have gone to jail, except that there was a case similar to mine that came up, and the judge threw it out. That meant my case was thrown out, too, because my draft board had refused to allow me to apply for conscientious objector status. The courts say you must at least allow him to apply, and then you can reject him, you idiots. You should not refuse to give them the application, which is what they did. That was my draft board in Georgia. In any case, I get turned towards the social sciences. I enrolled in the New School for Social Research in New York, and I actually got my master's degree there. At that time, the New School was a hotbed of political activism. SDS, SNCC, all the student organizations had chapters there. I continued my activism in both civil rights and the anti-war movement at that time as well.

In the course of my grad school work, I learned about a newspaper called *The Guardian Newspaper*. It was originally called *The National Guardian*, and it came out of the Progressive Party and the Wallace Progressive Party of the late forties and fifties. This newspaper was basically an independent, left-wing paper. Somebody had given me a subscription to it. I had started reading it and really liked it. At this point, it was also in transition from being an old left—as we used to say—old left publication, to having been basically taken over by SDS and SNCC folks who became the staffers and the editors and so on. They turned it into a new left paper, independent, Socialist paper. At some point, when I finished up my grad work, I noticed there was an ad there. They were looking for a reporter. I hadn't had any real journalistic experience, but I thought, "I'll give it a shot." I guess I'd be interested in trying this work as a way of continuing my movement work, but as a journalist, trying to analyze it, too. Trying to put this into some sort of perspective. Writing about it.

01-00:10:07

Arbona:

This is before you had to do a dissertation, but you'd finished coursework and you went to work there?

01-00:10:13

Allen:

Right. Yeah, there was no dissertation for the MA at New School. It was just coursework. I was not in the PhD program. I just did the master's. Having completed that, I'm looking for, well, what am I going to do now? So I began writing for *The Guardian* as a correspondent. This was in 1966, '67, so it was a pretty hot time because the Black Power movement is going on, the anti-war

movement is going on. There's a lot of stuff that's happening. The urban rebellions. All of this is happening around this time, and I get to write about a whole lot of it. For me, that was as much a part of my education as anything else. Those three or four years that I wrote for *The Guardian* were my political education, and they were my education in movements and how movements work, the problems and issues that pop up in movements, and so on. It further confirmed me in my desire, then, to actually study formally and to eventually get a PhD and to study sociology.

I moved out to the West Coast in 1968. By then, I was married and my wife, Pamela Allen, was active in the women's liberation movement. She's Caucasian. She was actually very active in forming what came to be known as the white women's liberation movement in the late sixties. So she's also an activist. She had also been in the Civil Rights Movement, as she had gone to Mississippi in 1964. She was, and still is, a very political person. Again, that solidified for me, then, this connection to being involved in political struggles, social movements, and also having an interest in and an understanding from an academic or theoretical point of view, to put this in the context of how society works and how do these movements then contribute to social change. We moved out to California in 1968. Both of us had sort of had it with New York by that time, and moved out to California.

I had written a series of articles for *The Guardian* on the Black Power movement. They were published as a pamphlet, as a matter of fact, and that pamphlet caught the attention—well, actually, it was Julius Lester, the writer, who also wrote for *The Guardian*. He suggested that I should develop that pamphlet into a book, and he actually helped me to find a publisher, which was Doubleday. That was my first book, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, which I wrote with Pam in California, but all the research and all the legwork for it basically had been done working for *The Guardian*. Although being out here on the West Coast, I now had the opportunity to write about the Black Panther Party, the West Coast radicalism, black radicalism on the West Coast, in a way that I had not known it before. Then the second book I wrote, *Reluctant Reformers*, was a study of social reform movements in US history, starting with the abolitionist movement, looking at the Progressive movement, the Populist movement, women's suffrage movement, labor, and the radical movements of the thirties. Again, the focus was still this continuing interest in social movements, and leading up then to returning to school in the late 1970s at UCSF, which is the medical school, but they have a small program up there in sociology. So I did my PhD at UCSF in sociology, and finished that in 1983.

It was while I was in the process of doing that that I came across the Port Chicago story. I think I'd actually come across it—well, it was just before I got into grad school. I was freelancing, still, then. I was doing an article about racism in the US Navy. There had been these incidents that had happened on some Navy ships in the seventies. Ku Klux Klan activity on Navy ships. There

was a big uproar about that, and I began researching the issue of racism in the Navy. I was look through some old files—I think it was at the ILWU Library, as a matter of fact, in San Francisco. I was doing this research, and I came across a pamphlet about Port Chicago that had been published in 1945 by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. The first question in that pamphlet was, “Remember Port Chicago?” I had no idea what they were talking about. I thought they were talking about the port of Chicago. But they talk about this explosion that had happened and everything and that there were black sailors there who were segregated in the Navy base. Men forced to work under these terrible conditions, race against each other. Terrible explosion. So many killed, so many injured. Worst home front disaster of all of World War II. And I had never heard of it. Never heard of it. I was just astonished, because obviously this was a huge thing that happened. A terrible tragedy, and then compounded by and made worse by the fact that these young sailors, who then engaged in a work stoppage, were convicted of mutiny. They could have been put to death. In time of war, they could have been put to death for having been convicted of mutiny.

So I was just astonished by this and immediately went to—by that time, I think I was living here in Oakland. I went to the main branch of the Oakland Public Library, figuring that there’s got to be at least one or two books written about this thing. I want to know about it. Nothing. No books written. There was, I discovered later, a book that was written in 1968. A very short, paperback, *No Share of Glory*, written by somebody connected with the Navy.

01-00:16:52

Arbona:

Pearson’s book?

01-00:16:53

Allen:

Robert E. Pearson’s book, 1964. I read that, but I already knew enough to realize that it was full of errors, because he basically relied on the newspaper accounts. There were a lot of newspaper accounts, because the trial was open to the press, which was extraordinary. A mutiny trial in a time of war, open to the press? Never heard of such a thing. But this trial was, so there was a lot of coverage of it. The coverage tended to be full of errors, and I realized that his account was unreliable and that I would have to try to find any other accounts I could. Nothing else had been written that I could find, although when I went into the archives and looked at the newspapers and the accounts from that period, I realized this terrible event and the subsequent mutiny trial had been covered in every major newspaper in the United States, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and so on. Front-page news. As I realized, this was a huge tragedy that occurred in the middle of the war, and then this huge thing of the mutiny trial, the alleged mutiny, afterwards. So it was in the course of my graduate work, then, in sociology, that I began working on it. In fact, that became my PhD dissertation. It was the first work that I did on researching Port Chicago. So that’s the short answer to your question.

01-00:18:32

Arbona: You're telling me this is 198—

01-00:18:35

Allen: 1983.

01-00:18:36

Arbona: Is when you finished?

01-00:18:37

Allen: Finished. That would have been the dissertation. The dissertation has to be in dissertation format. You know what's required there. I wanted to publish it as a book, but I always wanted it to be accessible to ordinary folks. I didn't want to have something that would only appeal to scholars. I realized early on that this was an unfinished story, that it was still unfolding, and that, in fact, for one thing, the mutiny conviction still stood. By this time, the research I'm doing has convinced me that this was not a mutiny, it was a work stoppage against racism and unsafe working conditions, and would have been recognized as such if it had happened in civilian life. At the waterfront here in Oakland among stevedores, it would have been recognized as a strike, but there's no such thing as a strike in the military, so they were charged with mutiny.

The injustice of it, then, the horror of the explosion itself—they never found the cause of the explosion, although in reading the accounts and so on, I have a scenario in mind, a possible way it may have occurred, based on the facts that are known. I can't prove my theory, and there was no other theory really offered in the investigation that the Navy conducted, except they eventually ended up blaming the black sailors by saying, it must have been carelessness and improper behavior. Improper handling of the bombs by the ammunition loaders, all of whom were African-American teenagers. It must have been carelessness on their part that caused the explosion. Which I don't think it was when I look at it, but I can't prove my theory. And there's nothing else that's really been put forward, except, of course, this notion that it might have been a nuclear disaster. That also has not been proven. We're left with not really knowing what happened there, except that these sailors died unnecessarily in a terrible tragedy, and that those who then attempted to point out and resist this continuation, those who engaged in the work stoppage, were then convicted of mutiny.

Effectively, the whole thing gets dumped on the sailors who are working there, the young African-American sailors. It must be that these troublemaking black sailors—and now the fact that they had engaged in a mutiny became evidence that they were troublemakers. I think that's why the trial was held in public, because, in so doing, the Navy could say, you see? These black sailors are troublemakers. They've engaged in mutiny. They probably were careless and irresponsible in their behavior in loading ammunition, and that's why the explosion occurred. So it gave the Navy a

very convenient explanation, in which the officers were relieved of any responsibility for the tragedy or the work stoppage. All of this worked in the interest of the Navy. I think that's why they had the trial in public and why they took the position they did. But it backfired, because of Thurgood Marshall's involvement, Thurgood Marshall really questioning the officers about the conditions that existed there before the explosion, and ultimately publishing that pamphlet in 1945 that I would find forty-something years later and become interested in this story.

The thing is, as I worked on this I realized that the story is still unfinished, but I had no idea what to do next, except to try to get this book out and to make the book accessible to a wide audience. I realized that if anything was going to change, it had to reach people who would be in a position to do something. The story had to get out. From the very beginning, I was looking for ways to get the story out. I had joined *The Black Scholar* as an editor in 1972, and in 1982 I published my first article on Port Chicago in the journal.

I must say that one of the blessings from working on this story has been the fact that as people hear about this story, they become very intrigued by it, the magnitude of the disaster, which is always astonishing. Almost everyone I encounter has never heard of it before, because it basically was submerged under other war news during the war. Something big and dramatic was happening every day. Subsequently, the Navy really had no interest in the story coming out, because, as far as they were concerned, the book was closed, the sailors were guilty, and they should have been convicted of mutiny. But I, in coming along all these years later and looking at this and saying, this was not a mutiny—if this had happened in civilian society, it would have been seen as a protest or a strike, and it would have been regarded as a legitimate protest, a legitimate strike. But not possible in the military. That was what led me, then, to write the book the way it is written. It's written to appeal to a popular audience, although the analysis that I did, the sociological analysis that I did, is there as well. Many people have found that very helpful, because it is a discussion of some issues that come up in social movements. Folks who are interested in social movements find that very helpful.

With the publication of the book, immediately interest picked up. These were not things that I did. These were things that simply happened because people were coming across the story and getting interested, as I had been interested. As I had been fascinated by this story, and had been determined to try to do something to help get the story out to a wider audience. The first thing was that—I think it was Belva Davis, probably, over at Channel Four, who was a newscaster over there, got a copy of the book early on. The book was published in 1989. I completed the dissertation in 1983. It took a while to get my life back together after doing a dissertation. You will find that it happens. It absorbs your whole life, and then when it's done, all of a sudden, what do I do now?

01-00:25:31

Arbona:

But you had the article out.

01-00:25:33

Allen:

That article was done in 1982, in *The Black Scholar*. That was the first publication. That was early on in the research. The book comes out in 1989, and then I get a call from KRON-TV, Channel Four, in San Francisco, saying, “We want to do a documentary on this story, and we’d like you to help us. We’d like to make use of your book and the people you interviewed for this documentary.” I said, “That’s great. Sure, I’ll be happy to cooperate.” This was now October of 1989. They’re saying they want to do this and have it ready for Black History Month in 1990. In other words, a matter of a few months. Even I knew enough to know that you can’t do an hour-long documentary for TV in a couple of months. But they said they could, and bless their hearts, they did. They had a very small budget. The people who worked on this, the photographer, the producer, other staff that they brought in from the station—in the end, that must have been seven or eight different people who worked on that documentary. For all of them, it turned into a labor of love. They all became fascinated by the story itself, wanting to find out more details. It’s a San Francisco story as much as it is a Navy story. A lot of the characters, especially the officers, were San Franciscans or people from the East Bay. Like Coakley himself, for example. They regarded it as much as a Bay Area story as anything else, and so they were treating it from that perspective and were very interested in putting it together.

Lo and behold, they managed to get interviews. Got a little money to fly back East to interview some of the folks I had interviewed. They actually located the defense attorney, which I had not been able to do, in Texas, and interviewed him. They put together what I think is still the best documentary on the case, on what happened and then the mutiny trial. It was narrated by Danny Glover. Danny Glover just stepped up and volunteered to do it. He was very happy also to be involved in this project. That’s when I began to understand that the story, as a thing in itself—it’s almost like it had a life of its own, and the life of this story attracted other people to it, and brought in people who wanted to work in some way to advance the story. The fact that the story was unfinished was evident to everyone, and they wanted to do something to somehow bring it to what would hopefully be a good conclusion.

01-00:28:39

Arbona:

A lot of the sailors had spoken to you anonymously or had not wanted their name to be published. How did things start to change that, for instance, a television crew contacts them? They start to become more willing to come out in public. How did that work?

01-00:28:56

Allen:

Well, this was one of the unexpected things, of which there have been many, that happened in the course of working on this research. When I initially decided to do the research and was able to really commit to it—and I got a

Guggenheim Fellowship, by the way, which was really what enabled me to do this. I didn't think I would get it, but I thought, "I've got to get some kind of funding here if I'm going to really do this, so let me just take a shot." I got it. That funded me for a year, then. Enabled me, then, to really track down ten survivors. It took quite some time to do that. I had to do everything I could think of to try to locate these—because, remember, this is almost forty years later that I'm starting to work on this. These men, who knows where they have dispersed to in the meantime?

The Veterans Administration was helpful. They would not give me addresses, but they did a blind mailing for me to the last-known address they had for the survivors. I was particularly interested in talking to those who were involved in the work stoppage, in the so-called mutiny. Red Cross was helpful. I pored over telephone books for days at a time, hoping to find names that way. Eventually, I found ten of them. As it turned out at that time, all of the survivors that I found were back East or in the South, not surprisingly, because the men who came into the military at that time were volunteers or draftees from the South or the East Coast. Most of them had returned to their homes, as it turned out, their hometowns, and that's where I found most of them that I interviewed.

I wasn't quite sure, how do I manage this? I'd written to them and talked to them on the phone. I had gotten permission to come and do an interview with them. At the time, the Greyhound Bus Company had what they called a See America fare, whereby, for \$100, you could buy a ticket that enabled you to travel on a Greyhound bus, anywhere in the United States, for a month. At that time, being a poor graduate student, I realized, that's my ticket. I can get on and ride that bus, and just start in New York, where the first survivor I had located lived, and come down the East Coast, where the others were, and into the South, and spend a few weeks on that bus and do my interviews. I don't recommend that. I don't recommend that. You really don't want to spend a lot of time on a Greyhound bus. Especially at night.

01-00:31:49

Arbona:

This is before you're done with your degree.

01-00:31:52

Allen:

Right, yes. I'm still working on the degree then. It enabled me to get the first bunch of interviews done, but it also, and this comes back to your question, then, made me aware of something else, which is that many of the men were still, at this late date, forty-something years later, traumatized by what had happened to them. The very first man that I planned to interview lived in Harlem. We talked on the phone. He had agreed to the interview and so on, and so I show up at his house. He lived in a nice brownstone on—I forget what the street was—in Harlem. I knock on the door. He opens the door. We greet each other. But instead of him inviting me in, he steps out and closes the door behind him. I'm thinking, "Hmm, that's odd." He says, "We need to go

down the street to do this interview. We'll go to a neighbor's house, just a couple of doors down, and we'll do it there." He seemed a little tense, but what could I do but say, "of course"? So we went to the neighbor's house. He was tense. It was clear that there was something that was disturbing him. We did do the interview. We talked for over an hour and a half. By the end of the interview, he had relaxed enough to say to me, "Well, you know, I didn't invite you into my house today because my son was at home." He said he had a twenty-two-year-old son, and that he never told his son about what happened at Port Chicago. This is one of the men who had been convicted of mutiny. He had never told his son about what happened at Port Chicago, and he wasn't sure that he wanted his son to find out now, and that's why he wouldn't invite me into the house. He would have had to introduce me and say something about why I was there. When he said that to me I was stunned, because I realized that he hadn't told anybody in his family about this huge thing that had happened in his life. Now, with his grown son, he still didn't know if he wanted that son to know about it.

When I realized that, it made me think maybe this is a message for me here. Maybe this is a message that maybe I shouldn't be doing this. What right do I have to come along and re-traumatize these men by asking them to tell me about this terrible thing that happened that they won't even talk to their families about because it's so traumatic? What right do I have to come along and now re-traumatize them? For what reason? Why am I doing this? It really caused me to examine myself. Obviously, I'm doing it because now I'm working on a PhD and this is my dissertation. What else am I going to do? What purpose is this going to serve? I stayed up that whole night after he told me that, thinking about it, and thinking, maybe I shouldn't continue. Maybe this is a sign that all I'm going to do here is reintroduce terrible memories. This is not going to be any help at all. Well, I thought, "All right, look. Here I am in New York here. What am I actually going to do now? I've got this bus ticket. I've got these other interviews scheduled." I couldn't just stop. What am I going to do? What would I say to the others? So I just said, "Okay, I will do one more interview, and if the same thing happens, then it really is a sign that I shouldn't be doing this."

Well, the second interview was in New Jersey, with Joe Small, who had a completely different experience. He had told everybody. Joe was mad when he came out of the military, and he talked to people about what had happened there and the injustice that was done to him. He himself had been accused of being the ringleader, mainly because he was the oldest person. He was twenty-three at that time. He was one of the oldest among the so-called mutineers and the most outspoken. Because he was like an older brother, the younger guys came to him, talking about, what should we do? That gets him, basically, unintentionally, fingered as the ringleader. As the Navy knows what's going on, they look at this as evidence that Joe is in fact the leader of this thing. His interview was especially helpful, and it especially helped me also in understanding here what I should do, which is that the injustice of it that had

been done in convicting these men of mutiny angered him, although he had come to terms with it, as you know from the book. He had, in a way, come to terms with it. But it angered him the way they were treated, and that anger was still there. The anger was due to the injustice, the injustice which still existed, because the mutiny convictions were still on their records. Those convictions had in fact impacted their lives, even though they were released eventually on general discharge rather than a dishonorable discharge. A general discharge is like a discharge from the military with a hidden red mark on it. Employers, institutions, they know how to read that hidden red mark, which says, this guy was a troublemaker when he was in the military, but he served his time and cleared his record. Well, that's telling them, though, that the guy's a troublemaker. A lot of people won't hire somebody with a general discharge because of that very reason. All these guys had a general discharge. Many of them had trouble getting work when they came out of the military.

So the injustice of the convictions for mutiny in fact impacted their lives, although they were released on general amnesty in 1946. They thought their records were cleared, but no, they're not, because of this general discharge that they all got, which continued to impact their lives. I realized, that's what has to be done here. That's the part that's unfinished. There has to be some effort to get these convictions cleared, overturned, or whatever can be done. For that to happen, the story has to get out. That's my job. That's why I'm here. This is what I'm supposed to be doing. Talking with Joe reaffirmed the idea that the injustice itself, the fact that the injustice still remained and that it affected the men's lives, and so this was the reason that I should continue working on this book and getting the research done. Beyond, of course, the immediate personal interest in getting a PhD. That it would serve some purpose on a larger scale.

01-00:39:33

Arbona:

Was there also an interest in the atmosphere at the time? Studs Terkel maybe had read your article and found out who Joe Small was.

01-00:39:45

Allen:

Yeah, Studs read it. He approached me, as a matter of fact. In fact, if you read his book, in the acknowledgments, he says I'm the one who helped put him in touch with Joe Small. The irony is, though, that his book came out before mine, and so a lot of people asked me, "Did you get the idea from Studs Terkel?" I said, "No, he got it from me, and if you read his acknowledgments he says that." He published that interview with Joe Small, and again, it stirred a lot of interest. It was a factor also in continuing to think about it. Plus, I just loved Studs Terkel's work, anyway. I had already been reading his stuff, even before he did that book on World War II. I liked his work. I used it as a model, in fact, for how I wrote parts of the Port Chicago book. What Studs does is he does interviews. He does oral history interviews, but he rewrites them as narratives. I decided that's what I wanted to do. The book I wanted to write would be a narrative rather than a technical, academic book, or the usual

oral history, where you have a Q&A format. I wanted to rewrite it as though the men were simply sitting here in the room, telling us their stories. So without the Q&A, and reconstructed in a narrative form. I got that from Studs. He inspired that approach.

To return, then, to the search for people to interview, Joe got me pointed in the right direction again. I was able, then, with a clear conscience, to complete the interviews. It was always the case that the men were told that this would be confidential and that names would not be used. In the dissertation, that's the way I played it. In thinking about writing the book, I realized, wait a minute, wait a minute, I just can't have anonymous speakers here. People are going to want to know—especially since these guys are alive—people want to know who they are. So I asked some of the men—actually, I asked them all—if I would be able to use their names. Some gave permission, like Joe Small and Jack Crittenden and some others whose names I mention in the book. Others did not. So I respected that. It was important, because, as it turned out, when the book came out, yes, there were people like this TV documentary crew that wanted to go and interview these guys. You can't do anonymous interviews for a documentary in this situation. You need to show these guys, who they are, that these are real human beings here who had been through this terrible thing. So Joe and several other men who had agreed to have their names used in the book also became, then, the people who were usually interviewed for the TV clips and documentaries and so on.

Eventually, several of the men whose names I didn't use—primarily because of the trauma thing and the fact that they had not told their families, and therefore I could not use their names in the book, even if they gave me permission before they told their families, I just didn't think that would be right. They shouldn't find out about it from reading this book. Several of the men subsequently told me that after the book came out, they showed it to their families and said, "I was there." The families were just amazed. In some cases, that made a huge difference within the families. For example, there's a story of this man named Albert Williams, whom I had not found and did not interview for the book, but who subsequently, after the publication of the book and documentaries were done, his daughter was sitting, watching one of these documentaries on Port Chicago with her dad sitting there, watching too. She realized from her father's reaction that he knew something about the story. She said, "Dad, what do you know about this story?" He said, "I was there." It was the first time he had ever told her that he was there—watching the documentary on TV. She is stunned by it, of course, and she proceeds to talk to him. Ultimately, she becomes involved in trying to get his record and get his name—he was one of those convicted of mutiny. Get his name cleared.

That's how some of the families found out; it was just incidentally, coincidentally, like that, seeing something on TV. Or, in the case of the man I spoke about earlier, he showed the book to his son and explained to his son why, and his son understood. I later got a call from the son, saying, "I'm glad

you did this book, because not only did it break down a barrier between myself and my father about what had happened during the war, but it turns out there were a lot of other things he had not told me that he now wanted to talk to me about,” the son said. I realized that there was a barrier, or wall of silence, that had developed in that family, traceable to this traumatic thing that had happened. That wall of silence came down when the father and the son were able to talk about what happened. That was a completely unexpected blessing, really, of doing this research. It impacted some of the families in a very positive way, even though we didn’t overturn the convictions. It still helped the families to heal, I think, from this tragedy.

As I go to the memorial services every year now, I’m always meeting people who are telling me that this is how they found out about the story for the first time, and the consequences of what finding out meant in their lives. Which is a better understanding of what had happened to a relative who died there, for example, or understanding what happened to a relative who was imprisoned because of it. It had enormous impact on the lives of many people, and people whom I never even met, but who were there or had someone who was there at the time. Now they can read and understand what happened. A major, major value of the book itself, I think, is that it helped in the healing of many families and individuals who were there and, really, themselves, wounded, traumatized, by what had happened, and not having the ability to really deal with the trauma. If you keep it inside and it’s this terrible secret that you can’t share with anyone, then there’s no way really to heal it. But if you can talk with your family, if you can share it with other people, if you can come to these memorials where so many people who were traumatized gather every year, then it becomes part of a process of healing. Which I had not even thought about when I started working on this book. It had not occurred to me that this healing would be a part of what would happen, but it’s an important part of what’s happening.

01-00:47:30

Arbona:

I want to come back to that healing process and the memorial. It’s in my outline, too, the experience of memorializing and going back there, but I wanted to then go back to that time the book comes out. There’s sort of this momentum. How does George Miller get involved? Do you get contacted by his office, or what happened?

01-00:47:57

Allen:

This is in Congressman George Miller’s district. He’s actually known about this for a long time, and he’s actually been involved, in various ways, early on, trying to get some sort of memorial out there. When the book comes out, and then, particularly, the documentary, the first one that’s done by KRON-TV, Ron Dellums, Pete Stark, and other Bay Area congressional leaders also hear about the story. They are interested in doing something to overturn the mutiny convictions. George Miller comes onboard, particularly, at that time, with the idea of the memorial. By the summer of 1990, he had

gotten the military to put up a temporary memorial out there. Basically some kind of plywood lecterns or something they'd put out there with the names of the men on them. Temporary, slapdash kind of thing. That was the first time the Navy had done anything about recognizing what had happened there. I think the first memorial service was held that year, too, 1990. This is George Miller's work. George Miller comes in, then, to work on this from the standpoint of the memorial. Now, remember, this is George Miller, Jr., the son of George Miller, Sr., who had also been a long-term supporter of equal justice, civil rights, and fair treatment. He had been one of the supporters of A. Philip Randolph and C. L. Dellums when they were pushing for the Fair Housing Act in California back in the fifties.

George Miller, Jr., then, is basically carrying on a tradition here of progressive activism. He becomes, then, our main spokesperson in terms of Congress, particularly with regard to pushing for the memorial, and hopefully, eventually, overturning the convictions. He's very much interested in that. I'm not sure when is going to be the political moment when this is going to happen, but it will take an act of Congress to overturn those convictions. The Navy has absolutely refused to do so, saying that the convictions were justified, that there was no racial discrimination in the trial itself, and that they are not going to overturn the convictions. For these reasons, it will take an act of Congress to actually overturn those convictions, since the Navy and the Defense Department have said they're not going to do it. I know we're going to continue pushing this. We've managed to get the memorial here, and I'm appreciative to President Obama for signing that legislation in 2009, but that's only part of what we're trying to do. Getting these convictions overturned is now priority number one for me and others who are interested in this.

01-00:51:46

Arbona:

When these things are building up—Miller and others are working on the memorial, the pardons, the book is getting attention—did you experience any form of pushback, or was there resistance to changing things, building a memorial, what have you?

01-00:52:17

Allen:

The common thing I get is basically people who say, "Well, you can't have a work stoppage in the middle of a war. These guys should have been convicted of mutiny." People who basically are saying these guys deserve what happened to them. I haven't gotten any official pushback in the sense of anybody saying that I'm barking up the wrong tree or anything like that.

01-00:52:54

Arbona:

[tape break] We just took a very short pause, but back rolling.

01-00:53:03

Allen:

There's not been anything where I felt like there was some hand at work here trying to stop this or anything like that. I was very surprised when I started the research and I showed up at the Pentagon, asking to see stuff there in the

library there, in the National Archives and other places. I was anticipating that somebody was going to say, “You shouldn’t be working on this” or “This is confidential” or whatever. But I got a pretty open response, and I think it’s because it was a generational thing. The people I was going to talk to about this incident, and that helped me in the archives, for them, this was ancient history. They were all in their twenties. They were as curious about it as I was. Many of the young archivists who were working there went out of their way to help me in the military libraries. I don’t know if I would get that same reception now, but at the time, I had no sense that there was anybody attempting to keep this hidden. Remember, it was fifty years ago, so who’s interested in keeping this hidden?

I actually got a lot of cooperation at the lower levels of the military, but when things would get up to the brass, then it was always, no. For example, when the first documentary was done and they had a showing of it over at the Calvin Simmons Theater, like a premiere, 2,000 people came out to see this premiere, and they paid ten bucks a piece to see a documentary that they could see free the very next night on TV. It was really remarkable. The money that was raised was donated to a sickle cell anemia foundation. We asked Danny, since he had donated his services—he could say what would be done with the money that would be raised at the showing of the documentary, and that was his suggestion, donate it. However much it turned out to be after the expenses was donated. I forget where I was going with that. What was the question?

01-00:55:37

Arbona:

You were mentioning that the top brass gave you some—

01-00:55:41

Allen:

At this premiere, at which, by the way, several new survivors turned up that we hadn’t met before—and we invited them up on the stage to be welcomed and everything—it turned out that there were four Navy officers there, in their twenties. They came up to me afterwards and said, “We work in the public relations office,” or something like that, in the Navy. Public affairs. “We wanted to talk to you, because we believe that the Navy today can take a position on this, that this is something that happened fifty years ago, when the whole society was racially segregated, all of the military was segregated, and that what the Navy was doing was simply what was the common practice then in the military, and that the Navy today, the new Navy, can take a position on this that this is an injustice that happened then, and we’re going to redress it now.” I said, “That’s a terrific idea. I encourage you to run with that.” They said that this is something that they were going to argue and put forward to the higher-ups. Never heard from them again. I’m sure the idea was quashed.

But again, it’s, as I said, the generational difference. For the young people, they don’t have any need to cover this up. They don’t have any stake in it about protecting whatever it is the Navy is trying to protect. I don’t know what. Or hiding—what is it they’re trying to hide. The young people get

quashed by the brass, the higher-ups, who decide, “No, we’re not going to overturn those convictions.” After thinking about that long and hard for all these years, I myself have come to the conclusion that, yes, they are not going to overturn those convictions, because to do so would mean that the Navy would have to admit that it was wrong to charge those sailors of mutiny and convict them of it. That that was a miscarriage of justice that should not have happened. That’s what it would mean. They would be admitting that, that it should not have happened. If it should not have happened, then what does that mean? It means the sailors were right. What? It means that the sailors really had a case there about the unsafe conditions, the racism, and so on. Yes, it’s true, they had a case. And who were these sailors? Black men. Black teenagers. Most of them were twenty or younger. The oldest was Joe Small, at twenty-two or twenty-three. It would be for the US military to basically say that a bunch of black teenagers stood up to the US Navy and compelled the US Navy to change its racial policies. The Navy will never admit that.

01-00:58:46
Arbona:

I’ve read that other branches of the military have had to—well, the Army recanted in one case. They went back, reversed convictions in a similar case.

01-00:58:59
Allen:

Yeah, I know, I worked on one of those stories. The one about the guys who were denied the medals of honor during World War II. Long struggle to get that finally corrected.

01-00:59:11
Arbona:

Do you think there’s something different about the Navy? Is it a kind of culture that’s different than the other branches?

01-00:59:19
Allen:

I don’t know. People say that, because they say it’s about the culture of the Navy, which is the ships. You’ve got people who are on these ships. You’ve got to be able to manage people in very tight conditions here and be able to—whatever. But their notion is that you’ve got to have a homogenous Navy in order for everybody to pull together. That’s sort of been the logic of it, that the homogeneity of it contributes to, then, the loyalty and everybody being able to pull together as a team. But it’s not true. That’s an ideology that we know now—it doesn’t wash. That people can learn, in the training process itself, the bonding that occurs transcends racial lines. So it’s not about needing to have the homogeneity in order to be able to have an effective fighting force. It’s about the training, and it’s about the bonding that’s built up in the course of the training. I think the homogeneity argument is really just a cover, though, for white supremacy. What they’re really saying is that we need to have whites in control here in order to control everybody else, including the working-class whites who are in the ranks. The continuation of the racism, I think, is about the continuation of the need for this kind of very strict hierarchy, which is maybe more of a factor in the Navy than the other branches of the military. I don’t know. There’s also the Southern factor, that a

lot of the officers are Southerners—or were at that time. I don't know. I don't know if it was any worse there than anywhere else. I don't really have an answer.

01-01:01:15

Arbona: That's probably a good place to leave this one tape, because we're just a minute away from this one ending.

01-01:01:22

Allen: Well, good. That's a segment, then. We've got a segment done.

01-01:01:25

Arbona: So let me stop it there.

[End of Interview]