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The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Martin Bordenave: Port Chicago Oral History Project

Interviews conducted and donated by
Robert Allen
in 1980

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Martin Bordenave, Martin Bordenave: Port Chicago Oral History Project”
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Martin Bordenave served as a Navy seaman at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine during World War II. After the explosion at the base, Bordenave, along with others, refused to return to work at Port Chicago, and was one of the fifty mutineers prosecuted in the trial that followed. In his interview with Robert Allen, Bordenave discusses his time working at Port Chicago, the events leading up to the strike and the subsequent trial, and the impact the conviction carried into his life, even after the Navy.

Interview 1: August 23, 1980

Allen: Hello, test. Interview with Martin Bordenave. August 23, 1980. Hello, test test. Okay, seems to be working so I'll just—this has got one of those little built in microphones so we don't have to—. Maybe you could tell me first of all just a little bit about, you know, your background before you went into the Navy, your hometown, how you happened to go into the Navy.

Bordenave: Well, let's see, I have four brothers that enlisted in the Navy and I decided I wanted to go with them, so I went with them.

Allen: This is—where was your hometown then?

Bordenave: That was New Orleans.

Allen: New Orleans, yeah, yeah. What year was that that you enlisted then?

Bordenave: About 1942. I think it was August, 1942, the first time. I was discharged in April of 1943 and I went back in 1940—'44.

Allen: How old were you when you went into the service the first time?

Bordenave: Sixteen years old.

Allen: Sixteen?

Bordenave: And the doctor find out I was too young. He had me kicked out and when I became of age, well, I went back into the Navy.

Allen: Yeah. So, let's see, you were just starting high school, just getting about mid-way through or where was the point—?

Bordenave: I didn't go to high school.

Allen: Yeah, yeah.

Bordenave: I had to go to work because I has eight brothers and five sisters.

Allen: I see.

Bordenave: And in those days it was kind of hard for my father to send all of us to school.

Allen: Sure. So you went in at sixteen, then what did you? Where did you work then when you were in that first—?

Bordenave: On Mare Island, California, in the making of ammunition and the storing of them in the bunkers on the Island.

Allen: And then so you were in the service that first time about—in all about how long?

Bordenave: About seven months.

Allen: And then what happened? The doctor discovered that you were underage?

Bordenave: Yeah, I went for an examination and he looked at me and he saw that I was underage, so he had me kicked out.

Allen: But you came back again in—?

Bordenave: In '44. I think it was February of '44.

Allen: What did you expect when you enlisted in the Navy? What did you expect to find? What kind of work—?

Bordenave: When I first enlisted in the Navy, I loved the sea. I expected to be a sailor, like any other sailor that's in the Navy, but I found that I was considered a black person and I was put into a black outfit that was a slave outfit to me and—.

Allen: This was Port Chicago?

Bordenave: At Port Chicago. We went to work in cattle cars.

Allen: Cattle cars!

Bordenave: They had wire like this, you know, fence wire wrapped around the sides and the sides was steel and wire all around, and they had a guard on the back to see that you didn't get off on the way to the docks.

Allen: The whole train was made up like that then.

Bordenave: The whole thing, yes.

Allen: God! What was the training like at, where was it, Great Lakes?

Bordenave: Great Lakes, yeah.

Allen: What was that like?

- Bordenave: No training at all as far as being a sailor. I guess in their minds we were being trained to load ammunition. We were considered a cheap—in my mind—labor force from the beginning. My training as far as handling a rifle was a .22 rifle I used for about one minute on one target and that was my training as a rifleman. The rest of it was marching and taking your shots and—I think we went through the gas, we tried the gas masks on once—that's it.
- Allen: Yeah. So during the period at Great Lakes you really had no idea where you were going to be shipped or sent out or—.
- Bordenave: No. I expected to go aboard a ship though.
- Allen: So, when did you find out you were going to Port Chicago?
- Bordenave: Well, when I went back to Great Lakes they told me I was going—I was transferred to Port Chicago near the ammunition dump where would be loading ships for over—to be sent overseas. And like I said, it was nothing but black boys doing that.
- Allen: Yeah. What was that base like when you arrived there? What was your first impression of it?
- Bordenave: It was lousy. When I first got there they didn't have a recreation hall. They were still working on it.
- Allen: You arrived in '44. What month was that? Do you remember?
- Bordenave: I think it was around March of '44.
- Allen: Uh-huh.
- Bordenave: Every day was miserable there and when the explosion come up that just made me make up my mind I wasn't going to do it no more.
- Allen: Yeah. What was the typical day at Port Chicago like—I mean, just tell me—if you can just tell me a little bit kind of like what the day was like, from the time you got up, what you did and—.
- Bordenave: You work so hard on your shift that you go back to your bunk or take your shower or get in your bunk and wait till the next work shift. You got—every other week they gave you a leave up until twelve o'clock at night and we'd go to Pittsburg and come back. It was a miserable life. See, being a sailor on board ship, it was—it would be—it would have been better because, you know, you had what you wanted. You

didn't feel like you was put in a pocket. And like a mule, he goes to his stable and he stays out till the next morning to pull his wagon.

Allen: Yeah, yeah. What—the work you actually did there—what was your first assignment?

Bordenave: Well, at first I was in the boxcars, loading from the boxcars onto the winch cables. Then I got transferred from that to hatch attendant, you know, I was winch attendant. I'd tell the winch when to go up and come over the side, winch signaling.

Allen: So the hatch attendant, you actually worked up on the deck—.

Bordenave: On top of the deck.

Allen: Going between the rail and the hatch. How did you feel about handling the ammunition and so on? How did the other guys feel about that, the danger involved, and so on. Did you think about it or—?

Bordenave: Oh, they didn't care. They didn't have no training. They handled it. It could be the cause of the explosion because they handled it like it was a piece of rock or something. They threw it around anyhow. There was no training.

Allen: So there was no training. What about safety procedures or safety precautions?

Bordenave: There was nobody to tell anybody how safe that was on the dock. Nobody.

Allen: But the men knew it was ammunition?

Bordenave: Yeah, they knew it was ammunition.

Allen: But did anybody think it would explode—.

Bordenave: No, we—

Allen: —or that there was any danger?

Bordenave: The first time you handled it you may throw it a little rough, you know, and then they figure, well, it didn't go off so we'll throw it a little rougher. Sometimes the winch driver got reckless and sometimes it hit the side of the ship and wouldn't go off.

Allen: It wouldn't go off, yeah.

Bordenave: So, they figured, well, the detonators wasn't in the ammunition. So something went wrong.

Allen: Yeah. So the detonators were not in the bombs at the time they were loaded?

Bordenave: Right.

Allen: Were they were put on later, I guess, then?

Bordenave: Yeah. But there's a guy—I was interviewed on television, there was a guy that was in charge on Mare Island and he reported a bunch of bombs that were put aboard a boxcar that did have detonators in it.

Allen: Oh.

Bordenave: But he reported it and nothing happened about it. But he was interviewed on television and he spoke about it, but I don't think they put it on television.

Allen: No?

Bordenave: They cut that section out I think.

Allen: So, what happened the day of the explosion? You worked in the division number two. That's with the—.

Bordenave: Yeah. We had just gotten off, I think, about 4:30 and the next shift is the one that got it.

Allen: Did you know any of those guys who were—?

Bordenave: Blown up?

Allen: Yeah.

Bordenave: No.

Allen: They were a new division, right? They were just out of the boot camp, I think.

Bordenave: We were all just about out of boot camp over there.

Allen: Well, you had been a few months—.

- Bordenave: Yeah. Well, anyway, the explosion—I was knocked out of my bunk and had to go to the hospital because I was all cut up over my body from glass, I guess. And I fell out of—I must have—was blown about twenty feet, thirty feet from my bunk. And I woke up in the hospital.
- Allen: You were completely knocked out then?
- Bordenave: Yeah. ‘Cause the building was all crumbled up. I looked up and I just passed out, I guess. I can hear water flowing, busted pipes, I guess. And then, five days later, I was out of the hospital and during that time the Seabees had built three times as many docks as they had over there.
- Allen: Is that so?
- Bordenave: And I was on schedule to go to work that evening, the day I got out of the hospital.
- Allen: The day you got out of the hospital?
- Bordenave: Right.
- Allen: Did any of the men get any kind of a—what do they call— survivor’s leave?
- Bordenave: No. Not that I know of. I wasn’t offered any.
- Allen: What was the pace of the work like then, the loading. Do you go at your own pace? How is that set up?
- Bordenave: The pace was heavy. I mean, they told those guys they had to get these ships a certain time and then get them out. And, most of the guys, they went along with it. And they was doing a pretty good job, I imagine, as far as ammunition loading was concerned, but they didn’t know they was actually handling.
- Allen: Was there any competition or rivalry or anything like that?
{unintelligible overlapping of voices }
- Bordenave: I think there was a “E” sign for divisions that did the most work in, you know. I think they call it a “E” flag, they gave to the company that {inaudible} pretty much of the time.
- Allen: So the company that did the most loading got the flag then?
- Bordenave: Yeah.

- Allen: How did the other men that you worked with there, what was their general feeling about the place and the conditions, and so on?
- Bordenave: Well, we used to talk about how what big fools we were, you know, only black boys loading ammunition aboard ship. Only white boys can go aboard ships, unless you was a steward or captain's boy or something like that. That's the only way you can get to go aboard or something like that. That's the only way you can get to go aboard a ship. And I hated, from the time I hit Port Chicago to the time after the explosion, I just made up my mind I'd rather be dead than do that kind of stuff.
- Allen: Before the explosion, did the men either collectively or individually ever try to do anything about the conditions there—complain, gripe, or—? Talk to the officers or anything like that?
- Bordenave: Not that I know of. Well, all the officers were all white. Like I say, I figured it was a set-up thing from the first day of boot camp because of the training we received.
- Allen: You mean that you didn't have any training?
- Bordenave: No training at all—.
- Allen: Yeah.
- Bordenave: —to be a sailor aboard a ship, no.
- Allen: What were the relations like with the officers? They were all white.
- Bordenave: All white officers, yeah.
- Allen: And what was the—between the men and the officers—how did that seem to go?
- Bordenave: There was no contact actually until you was ready to get aboard the cattle wagon, I call it, to go to the ship. That's the only time I'd see my officer.
- Allen: Oh, yeah?
- Bordenave: Yeah.
- Allen: That was Lieutenant Tobin, I think was his name.
- Bordenave: Tobin, yeah.

Allen: Right, yeah. What you call the cattle wagon—that's what you get on to go down to the docks to load—?

Bordenave: Yes, yeah, the cattle wagon.

Allen: What was that—a big truck or—?

Bordenave: Big truck surrounded by fence wire just like this—.

Allen: Like this—.

Bordenave: Yeah.

Allen: —fence wire, here, back-home fence wire.

Bordenave: Yeah, and at night the truck would come back and get us and bring the other guys on the Island, go to sleep, or read, or whatever and wait 'till the next shift.

Allen: You'd have leave or liberty—you'd go—?

Bordenave: Every other week.

Allen: —every other week and then you could go to—

Bordenave: Pittsburg, California. Couldn't go to the— too far, because we didn't have weekend leaves, the whole weekend.

Allen: Yeah. What was Pittsburg like then?

Bordenave: It's a little one-block town with a few bars and that's it.

Allen: Yeah, That was—that was an Army base there, too, right?

Bordenave: Yeah.

Allen: Camp Stoneman or something like that.

Bordenave: Yeah, a lot of soldiers. We got along pretty well because we was all black.

Allen: Yeah. Did you run into much segregation or discrimination in towns like Pittsburg or—?

Bordenave: In Vallejo.

Allen: Vallejo, yeah.

Bordenave: Vallejo—I was in that riot they had in Vallejo. There was a riot in Vallejo when a black sailor hit a Marine guard and the Marines went back and got their guns and was shooting up the town.

Allen: These were white Marine guards, yeah.

Bordenave: They were the only ones that had access to guns. We didn't have no access to guns.

Allen: This was in—this would have been about 1942, then, when the riot—.

Bordenave: Well, '42, yes. And did you hear—?

Allen: That's right. I heard something about it but most of the—

Bordenave: I was in a movie at the time. I had to run back to the base.

Allen: [laughing]

Bordenave: Yeah, I had to run through an alley to keep from getting hit because they was firing.

Allen: They were firing?

Bordenave: Oh, yeah, they was firing.

Allen: What happened after that? That was—.

Bordenave: After that it was quieted down, see.

Allen: Did they make any changes or anything?

Bordenave: No changes.

Allen: No changes.

Bordenave: The only change came after our trial. They integrated the whole post.

Allen: The whole—yeah—that's true.

Bordenave: This is when my brother— he used to be a ammunition dump in Fallbrook, California, and he got transferred aboard a ship. But it took our trial to make the difference.

- Allen: That's true, because I've been looking at some of the Navy documents and so on, and it's really clear that until that trial, well, things were not going to change.
- Bordenave: No.
- Allen: And it took that to really bring these changes about.
- Bordenave: Yeah, it changed exactly right after the trial, it changed.
- Allen: Right. Well, so after the explosion, you were in the hospital for five days, you came out in order to go back to work the same day—.
- Bordenave: Right. The same day I came out of the hospital.
- Allen: —back to Port Chicago.
- Bordenave: Yeah.
- Allen: Was that to go back to work loading ammunition?
- Bordenave: Yeah, on the four o'clock shift, I think it was, that four to twelve.
- Allen: Well, was this before the general work stoppage or was this when that happened, when the men generally refused to go back to work?
- Bordenave: That was, well, I refused in my company.
- Allen: Yeah.
- Bordenave: There was no conspiracy on my part. I didn't find out—in the—let's put it this way—when I found out that I was under arrest for not going back to duty, there was only two guys that I knew in my company that didn't—didn't go. That was Ernest Gaines and McKinley, Lloyd McKinley.
- Allen: Lloyd McKinley, yeah.
- Bordenave: And that's the only two guys because I knew Gaines when he was at home in New Orleans and Lloyd, he was from Shreveport or one of them little country towns in Louisiana.
- Allen: Okay, you came out—you were ordered to go back to work and that's when you refused to go back to work at that point or was it later?

Bordenave: At that point, at that point, right then and there. See, my company—Lieutenant Tobin asked, “Who’s not going to work, let me know,” and I told him I wasn’t and that’s my disobedience of order. I admit to that. And I should have been put under arrest then for disobeying the order because I didn’t talk to nobody or ask anybody about anything but we were all put into a group with other guys that refused to go back. We was put in a group and we was sent to Mare Island, back to Mare Island—well, Vallejo—there was a base on Vallejo. And we was put all in a field and this admiral of the 11th Naval District and there was about fifteen hundred men that refused and he told the group—he had a Marine guard behind him with a machine gun—and he told the group that if they didn’t go back to work, he was going to see that all of them get shot.

Allen: That’s what he said?

Bordenave: Yeah. And so 1400 to fifty about, I figure, went back to work, and that, just us fifty stood on the field. See—so he said those that are—we was on a ball field—and he said those are, the ones that are not going back to work, will stand over there by the backstop. So fifty of us went by the backstop. Then they put us aboard a barge and this is when they got the mutiny from.

Allen: Yeah. So what happened on the barge then when they—?

Bordenave: We were under arrest on the barge. A few guys made statements that they would never go back to that or you know, I didn’t say anything. I just listened and made up—had made up my mind he could shoot me if he wanted to, I don’t care—it had gotten that bad, see.

Allen: There was a meeting on the barge, right—?

Bordenave: Yeah, Small held a meeting.

Allen: Yeah. Could you describe that?

Bordenave: I didn’t even hear what he said—I didn’t hear what he said. He was standing on a box or a bunk or whatever it was, but I didn’t pay attention.

Allen: You didn’t—but later on, they tried to get all the men to—well, they did an investigation and interrogated you about that meeting, right?

Bordenave: Yes.

Allen: And what happened in that interrogation then?

- Bordenave: Well, they tried to say that Small was our leader. They even sent some people out to talk to us that say that we were communists—.
- Allen: Oh, yeah?
- Bordenave: —and I didn't even know what a communist was, I used to say, well, communists was Russia, right? And they were fighting with us, right? I didn't know. So I was ignorant of the fact that at the time, you know, they tried everything.
- Allen: What did you think was going to happen at the point where you said, "I'm not going back there." What did you really think would happen?
- Bordenave: I thought they was going to shoot, I don't care. I mean he had a Marine guard behind him—you know the Navy, the strict rules of the service. You figure, well, he's going to shoot so let him shoot me—I'm tired, you know, fed up with it. I didn't care.
- Allen: After you got back on the barge, what did you think was going to happen then?
- Bordenave: I figured we'd go to trial and then get shot. It wasn't until later that I found out that Roosevelt had made a law that no mother's son would be shot in the United States.
- Allen: So you thought you'd be shot?
- Bordenave: Oh, yeah.
- Allen: Did you think you'd be charged with a mutiny charge?
- Bordenave: No, because how could it be a mutiny? I didn't talk to nobody. I didn't conspire with nobody. I just made up my mind I was tired of it, you know. I wanted to be a sailor. They talk about the Star Spangled Banner, you know, they was booing it the other day in Great Lakes. When they used to play the Star Spangled Banner, I used to feel proud, you know. I feel like those dudes that booed in Great Lakes now.
- Allen: [laughing] So they kept you on that barge for a while then the admiral made his threats and so on.
- Bordenave: Yeah. And then we was—I was shipped to Stockton. And there's tough Marines there—they'll tear your head off.
- Allen: Oh, yeah? What was that like?

- Bordenave: Oh, man! They talk about the, what the Koreans did to Commander Bucher. He had it good compared to the Marine beatings you got over at Stockton Stockade, the Marine stockade there. Sometimes we had to stand up at attention in front of the barracks for about eight hours after we finished working in the day, because somebody did something—one man had to do something wrong and then everybody suffered.
- Allen: So they had you working and at the same time you were in the stockade over there?
- Bordenave: Yeah, we was making cargo nets.
- Allen: Cargo nets, yeah. Now this was all before the trial then?
- Bordenave: Before the trial, right.
- Allen: So what happened at the trial then?
- Bordenave: At the trial we had to go on work parties too. Well, before we went to a {inaudible} I think it's on Yerba Buena Island at the top of Treasure Island, I think that is.
- Allen: One of your brothers was at Mare Island or somewhere in the same area?
- Bordenave: Yeah. He was there.
- Allen: He came and talked to you. I remember reading about that.
- Bordenave: Yeah. Tobin—Lieutenant Tobin had told him, “I’m going to give Martin another chance. You go and tell him if he come out of the group, he can go back to work.” So he came and told me and I say, “Well, you told me and that’s it. I decided that I’m not going through that shit again.”
- Allen: So they would try in different ways to get the men to go back, threatening and —.
- Bordenave: Right, yeah. You know, I could have gotten out of it if I’d go back to loading ammunition and this would’ve been a feather in their cap, you know.
- Allen: Now, while you were at Stockton—well, I guess on the barge and then later in Stockton what would you say was the attitude of the other men who were locked up with you?

- Bordenave: I think they were more happy in the brig than loading ammunition.
- Allen: Yeah?
- Bordenave: Yeah. I think they felt that they did something, you know, for a change. They did something for a change. I think that they found out the base was integrated. They felt a little better about it even though I don't think they knew it was going to come to that.
- Allen: So after this time in Stockton, then you go to trial at Yerba Buena, I guess it was, at Treasure Island.
- Bordenave: Yeah. We had to run everywhere you went.
- Allen: Oh, the Marine guards had you running, yeah—.
- Bordenave: Yeah, if you'd slow up he'd punch you in the head coming through the door, or something like that. They had a line of Marine guards that let you go to trial and then you had to run as fast as you could run.
- Allen: Yeah. Did you get a chance to meet with the defense lawyers before the trial? Did you ever talk to them about the defense strategy?
- Bordenave: I met with one of them once. The defense strategy, I don't—it was—to me it was a mockery. They didn't—he didn't tell how we felt about it or—he was part of the Navy. He was Navy, you know, so I don't know if his hands was tied or he wanted it that way.
- Allen: Well, it was interesting to me in reading through the trial transcript—they really kept out any discussion of the conditions on the base.
- Bordenave: Oh, yeah, they kept out—
- Allen: There was nothing about that at all, you know, or even the explosion. I think there was just—
- Bordenave: Or even how we felt about being put into that situation. Why were all blacks loading ammunition? Advertisement on a sign, "Join the Navy and see the world." You know, this is what I think—the average sailor joined the Navy to see the world.
- Allen: You, being from New Orleans, did you consider yourself black before you went into the Navy?

Bordenave: Yeah, yeah. Well, you know, I'm a half-breed, Creoles mixed with black, Spanish, whatever, you know, Indian—who knows what went back there?

Allen: [laughing] Yeah, I'm like that myself. I'm from Georgia.

Bordenave: I see that. I see that.

Allen: Did you get to meet Thurgood Marshall?

Bordenave: Yeah, I met him.

Allen: Well, what was that like?

Bordenave: Well, he said he was going to try and take over the trial but I—that's the only time I spoke to him and he's the one that told me that they're trying to say that you guys are communists.

Allen: Oh, he told you that?

Bordenave: Yeah.

Allen: So the fifty men did have a chance to meet with him then and talk to him a little bit about—

Bordenave: I don't know if fifty of them. I know that I talked to him.

Allen: You talked to him.

Bordenave: And he was going to try to get the trial turned over to NAACP {inaudible}?

Allen: Yeah. When the trial started the first day or the first few days, what did you think was going to happen?

Bordenave: Well, I thought they would shoot us, you know, like they said.

Allen: Yeah, so you didn't feel that there was much hope of getting a—

Bordenave: Didn't care too much at the time. You know you make up your mind that's it—that's it. You put your mind in a set thing and then, well, then shoot, let them shoot. But I still wasn't going to go back to loading ammunition.

Allen: So, after the trial, the verdict comes down and then—what happened then?

- Bordenave: The verdict came down that—let's see—I got eight years because I was one of the youngest. I think there was two other guys as young as I was, too, seventeen. And let's see, they got some, they got twelve years. I think Small got fifteen years with some of the other guys, and he was considered the leader. Never did see him before we—I saw him on the barge trying to make a speech.
- Allen: Yeah. So you—well, okay, go on back to that then. There was—was there any discussion among the men about just how they felt, you know, and about—after the explosion was there any discussion about not going back or anything like that?
- Bordenave: Not that I know of. I was in—I was in the hospital.
- Allen: You were in the hospital, so you couldn't have been involved in any—if there was, you wouldn't have known anything about it.
- Bordenave: I heard about how the bodies was picked up and thrown in the trucks like—from the other guys. I'm glad I didn't see it. But I supposed you can see it on Moviestar News if they let them shoot that sort of thing. They said they had guys' legs with the boot, boot on, heads, arms, little bitty pieces of bodies. I was at the funeral. They flew a plane over the water and they'd throw the bouquets out of it and blew taps. A lot of the mothers of the boys that died was there and they cried—it was sad. And that was one time I really made up my mind that that was it—no more.
- Allen: So you actually—you did—you were back at the base then after the explosion. You did some work there then. In fact, I was just looking here at—.
- Bordenave: I didn't do no work after the—.
- Allen: But you went back to—?
- Bordenave: —after I got out of the hospital.
- Allen: —after the explosion.
- Bordenave: But I didn't do no work.
- Allen: Yeah, okay.
- Bordenave: I refused to go back to work—I think we was just in our bunks then, so they decided to ship us to Mare Island.

Allen: So they put you on buses to send down to Mare Island?

Bordenave: Right.

Allen: And that's when you—

Bordenave: When the admiral approached us—

Allen: Yeah, yeah, okay. So, after the trial, then—in fact, they brought you down here to San Pedro, right? Is that where you were?

Bordenave: Yeah, right up near San Pedro.

Allen: What was that like?

Bordenave: It was okay. It was better than loading ammunition. We got to go to movies. We got to go to play baseball. We got to go to the library. We was more free there. They didn't have a library on Port Chicago.

Allen: No library. And, in fact, you said they were just starting to build a recreation hall at that point. What was the spirit of the men like after the trial and you were here in San Pedro? What was the—

Bordenave: After the trial?

Allen: Yeah.

Bordenave: To me, it felt good, because I think once we got to know each other we—we had a good group, you know? A group of guys that thought the same, that they didn't like the injustices of the Navy at that time. Still don't—I still don't think I'm a first-class citizen.

Allen: Because of the discrimination?

Bordenave: Even now you have discrimination. The Navy—you have cases, you know, that comes up every once in a while about discrimination aboard the ships, even though they're allowed aboard the ship.

Allen: When you look back on that, you know, and think about it, how do you feel about it, what you did and, you know, looking back on it now?

Bordenave: Oh, I'm glad I did it, you know. I feel that I did something for the black race. I feel that I had a—that I didn't belong to no group that called me a mutineer. This is why I'm trying to fight it—to get my discharge changed to an honorable discharge. There's a little change

now, I mean from back then. It was real bad then. But like I say, I still don't think I'm a first-class citizen. What I've done for myself, I did it on my own. I built this place myself, me and my partner.

Allen: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about this business here. When did you start that?

Bordenave: Well, I bought a liquor store across the street. See, I have four brothers and one sister with liquor stores. And I used to be an upholstery foreman out here in East Los Angeles. And I was the last one to decide to buy a liquor store. I bought across the street and without parking your time is limited. I mean you gross is limited.

Allen: Yeah, you need a parking lot like you got here for people—

Bordenave: And you can only go so far so a friend of mine, an electrician, he said, well, let's buy this lot over here to build a building. I don't know nothing about building buildings but we did it.

Allen: [laughing] He knew. It looks like you got a thriving business here too.

Bordenave: And it's a nice building too. I broke two arms. I fell off of the roof on the front end. Six weeks later, I was back up on the roof.

Allen: It's far to fall, too.

Bordenave: Up the front, the front angle here. We was putting on that shingle.

Allen: How long were you at San Pedro before you were released from there?

Bordenave: San Pedro? All in all we was confined about sixteen months. I think I was up there about eight months, about eight months. But Truman let us go—not Roosevelt.

Allen: Yeah, Roosevelt was—.

Bordenave: He died.

Allen: He was dead then.

Bordenave: But he had a chance to let us go.

Allen: Yeah, I've seen—there was a whole—the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall—they put together a whole petition campaign—.

- Bordenave: A lot of blacks think Roosevelt was for them, but it wasn't so. That's why Reagan likes him so much. Truman was the man for civil rights.
- Allen: I think you're right about that. Now, when they released you, they released you in groups, right?
- Bordenave: Yeah.
- Allen: What happened—who—you were released with the group of the men—?
- Bordenave: I think I was released with eight or nine guys. I don't remember how many. Anyway, we went to—I know I was released with Percy, 'cause they sent him back to the States. He was caught in the native camp after hours or so. And they told me he was going to do the rest of his time, but I don't think he did it. Oh, we went to—first we went to Guam. We was scheduled to work on Guam. The captain didn't want us on Guam, We had that record: fifty mutineers. And then we went to Yap. They didn't want us there.
- Allen: To where?
- Bordenave: Yap. I think that's out in the Carolina Islands, I think. And then we went to Peleliu. Well, they was a little short-handed, so they did need somebody to do something on the Island. It was after the war. I was a telephone operator.
- Allen: So, how long were you out there on the Islands before you got back to the States?
- Bordenave: About six months, I think. Truman told them, let us go.
- Allen: So, when you were released, what kind of a discharge did you get?
- Bordenave: Unhonorable condition. I was entitled to the G.I. Bill—
- Allen: Which is not—which—but it's not the same thing as an honorable discharge.
- Bordenave: —a regular discharge, yeah.
- Allen: So did you, when you came out, what happened then? Did you—you settled here then?
- Bordenave: Yeah—

- Allen: Or did you go back to New Orleans?
- Bordenave: No. See, I got out in Stockton again. Went to the base there. They was discharging from Stockton. I got released there and I never did go back to New Orleans. I haven't been back since.
- Allen: No? Well! [laughter] Yeah, I've never been to New Orleans myself, even though I was born and raised over in Georgia.
- Bordenave: They say it's changed down there but, you know—.
- Allen: I'd like to go there sometime.
- Bordenave: Down there you couldn't be a well digger. You couldn't be a cooper or—my uncle used to own a lunch wagon on the docks. Or, you couldn't be a cooper. You couldn't drive a lift truck if you's black. The only thing you used to drive with if you's black was one of them cotton—you know, those two-wheelers with the big 500 pound bale of cotton on it. Was the only thing they let you drive, if you was black. I couldn't—you couldn't do nothing. Average person from New Orleans that knew anything did it on his own. Like my father—he was a painter but he was a first-class painter. He never did work for anybody. At first, he was a peddler. He used to sell fruits and vegetables with horse and wagon. Then he did some things and then, when my trial came up, they all came up here.
- Allen: They did come out? And that's when they stayed out here then?
- Bordenave: Stayed out here, yeah.
- Allen: So, when you got out then, you had your family was here? And so you went to work here in Los Angeles?
- Bordenave: Oh, yeah. I didn't have a reason to go to New Orleans. Because there was nothing back for us there at all, that I know of. [laughter]
- Allen: Have you seen any of the other men, the fifty men, or talked to—?
- Bordenave: Haven't seen any—
- Allen: —of the men since it happened?
- Bordenave: —of them—
- Allen: Not since it happened? No?

Bordenave: I met one guy that's blinded from the explosion but he wasn't one of the fifty.

Allen: No. That's Robert Routh. That's the guy—I talked to him—that's Routh.

Bordenave: Yeah.

Allen: Robert Routh.

Bordenave: He was on TV with me the last time. He lives right around here somewhere.

Allen: Yeah, I interviewed him because I found out that he was at Port Chicago, even though he wasn't one of the fifty. So I said, well, I'm going to talk to him as man-to-man as near as I can. So I talked to him. I talked to Percy Robinson who lives here now. And there's another man—Freddie Meeks—.

Bordenave: Meeks? Yeah.

Allen: And he lives here too, so—.

Bordenave: Oh, Meeks? He's a big dude!

Allen: He is?

Bordenave: Yeah. He had broken his arm. The Marine guards was beating on him one night. Because he was so big, I guess they picked on him.

Allen: Yeah. Well, he's here in Los Angeles, too. In fact, I'm going to try to see him tomorrow.

Bordenave: Oh, yeah? He lives near me then.

Allen: Why, what's that—about a mile from here? Is that—?

Bordenave: Yeah. Tell him to come see me.

Allen: I will. I will.

Bordenave: Yeah. He was a—he was a big guy, but he was just like his name. He was meek.

Allen: Meek, huh?

- Bordenave: And those guards just picked on him. They wanted him to start something. The guards tried everything to, you know, to try to excite us to do something wrong.
- Allen: Trying to provoke you? Yeah.
- Bordenave: But nobody did. We had a Marine guard named Metcalf. He used to tell us, "Go ahead and run." You know, try to provoke us to run, you know, while we was on work detail. They just knew he was the biggest bigot in the world. He was from Chicago Heights, Chicago. And he tried everything he could. He was in charge of us during the trial, taking us to trial and back from the trial. Even run us up and down the hill before the trial got started, you know. It was tough.
- Allen: When you—was there any—you know, thinking back to the experiences that you had at Port Chicago before the explosion, I don't know—is there anything that particularly stick out in your mind about that, any incidents that happened or anything that comes to mind?
- Bordenave: No, it's just our work battalion, that's all. You worked, you ate and you went
- Allen: That was it.
- Bordenave: That was it. No exciting no nothing. Just a miserable place. I imagine this is how the slaves felt that days, they pick their cotton, they went to their shack, and went to sleep. That's it.to sleep—that's it.
- Allen: What was it like over there at Mare [Island]? You were doing you first hitch in the Navy when you worked at Mare Island. What was that like?
- Bordenave: That was a little better. You got to go to town. You got a weekend every weekend, to go to Frisco and have a little fun. We enjoyed it. And we did different jobs, you know. There wasn't that one loading ship, loading ship, loading ship, loading ship—well, it still wasn't right. Because I had that feeling, well, maybe one of these days they'll put me aboard a ship. Never did. Well, they did after the trial and we got out of the brig, well, the prison at San Pedro—we got aboard ship. Then, nobody wanted us on the Island. The captains owned those islands. [laughter] They acted like they was—like they owned those islands. They don't want no problems. But we didn't give nobody any problems. I just hope that someday it will get better, but I'm not waiting for it, you know. I've done it on my own.
- Allen: Yeah, you sure have. That's the truth.

- Bordenave: I just hope it gets better. Right now I have a daughter and three grandsons. I just hope—well, I'll have to make it better for them. I just hope that they can have it. It's a little better, but even the way this city is segregated here, you can tell it's not what it's supposed to be.
- Allen: Right, yeah. Yeah, I don't think things have really—since the rebellions of the '60's, it doesn't seem like that much has changed at all. In fact, in some places, it got worse.
- Bordenave: I tell the average black man to go ahead and get an education and apply for those openings that the government demands that he should have and try to make it, 'cause there's nobody—no white man is going to help us. Everything we've gotten we've fought and suffered for.
- Allen: That's the truth. We've had to fight every step of the way.
- Bordenave: Just like those boys in Florida. I guess they'll get a crumb thrown to them.
- Allen: That'll be about all.
- Bordenave: There'll be a few jobs opening. They may put a few more policemen around and that's about it, until they feel another pinch. And this is how all of this starts, you know, there's no justice as far as the black man is concerned. No justice at all—look at your prisons. You see mostly blacks in your prisons—.
- Allen: That's right. Somebody was telling me that it was something like eight percent in the federal prisons—eighty percent is black.
- Bordenave: It's all wrong. Well, I tell the average youngster, man, get an education and make it 'cause when you do make it, and you know you're good you go and fight for it. And that's the only way you get it. You gotta holler loud, you know. You just can't put in your application and they see you're black, they throw your application outside.
- Allen: Right. You got to go in and fight.
- Bordenave: Because they're going to give it to the white boys. So you can see, I'm still a little bitter.
- Allen: Hey, yeah. With reason, you know—.
- Bordenave: I'm not waiting for nobody to help me. I've made it—my dad taught me how to hustle.

- Allen: Well, you guys seem to have a good business going here—you seem well established.
- Bordenave: Oh, yeah, I bought that lot across the street. I used to own this building here and then I sold it to the church people. And now I own that building across the street where I used to be and I'm trying to sell that. And I'm going to put some HUD [United States Department of Housing and Urban Development] units across the street if I can get a HUD loan, you see, and I'm going to come up against—
- Allen: You're going to have to fight for that, yeah.
- Bordenave: —fight for that. I tried to get SBA [Small Business Administration] on here.
- Allen: Oh, the SBA. They don't do anything— you know, with our little—
- Bordenave: Oh, man! They used to tell you, oh, yeah, SBA. So, I told my partner, "Fuck them, let's start digging the foundation." And we dug the foundation and everything, put in plumbing, hung these—well, he's an electrician, I know he's good. Him and I put this big box up there and hung all them pipes, just him and I. The only thing we didn't do was the bricks. We did the roof and everything.
- Allen: Well, you got to do it yourself 'cause if wait for them—
- Bordenave: SBA, no! First thing, one guy wanted to—say, okay, I'll see can I make up your package. They want to know how much you own, how much you owe, how much you—just, you know, you go to a bank and get a loan easy—you just own the lot. So the lot was paid for, didn't owe any money, but at that time this was supposed to be a gray area. The banks say, well, you know, this is a gray area—I told my—oh, fuck them! Let's just start, you know, going on. I had a few bucks I work hard. I save my money and we'd go and buy so many blocks at a time and bring it on up. Took us a year to do this thing. If we'd of got the money, it would have taken maybe four months, but it took us a year.
- Allen: But you did it. You got all—
- Bordenave: But it's clear! It's ours! [laughing] It's ours, you know? The hell with the SBA! So, I'm going to build some homes for elderly people 'cause I know they're going to need it. You see, there's so many people—there's going to be so many elderly people pretty soon.
- Allen: That's true.

- Bordenave: So that lot across the street, I own. And I sold half of it to my partner. I was offered a \$100,000 for that lot—only paid thirteen for it.
- Allen: That's a prime location over there, sure.
- Bordenave: Yeah, and I sold him half for \$12,000, so we're gonna put some HUD units there—about fourteen, fifteen units.
- Allen: Well, that's good because—
- Bordenave: But I got to fight for a HUD loan, see? If not, I go ahead and—I just say fuck 'em again, you know, that's a bunch of shit! You know, them people in Washington and there's a black woman in charge of that.
- Allen: Not any more. That was Patricia Harris used to be in charge—.
- Bordenave: Yeah—she's not in charge anymore?
- Allen: No, no, they moved her out—see, because she was doing some good things there when she had it, but she was only there about a year, I think.
- Bordenave: Oh, yeah?
- Allen: And they moved her out to another department, and now they've got some dude—I don't know who it is—but that's what happens. See, when we get some good people in the—
- Bordenave: Yeah, I want to do good—I mean—
- Allen: —government, then they cut them loose, move them around, so that way they can't be effective any more.
- Bordenave: —but if I can't do it through them, why not do it through my own—
- Allen: Do it yourself, yeah.
- Bordenave: I know how to work. I know what I'm up against. Whitey taught me to go ahead and do it yourself—yeah, he taught me to do it myself.
- Allen: Well, thank you for letting me come over to interview you. That's about all the questions I have.
- Bordenave: Well, if you have some more, you can come back. I gave you that card for Hill—he has—

Allen: Let me get that from you. Let's see—and turn this thing off.

[End of Interview]