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Berkeley, California

George Cobbs:
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2008

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01-00:00:00

Rigelhaupt: It is March 19, 2008. I'm in San Francisco, California, at ILW Local 10, at their union hall. I'm doing an oral history interview with George Cobbs. And to start, if I could just ask you to say your full name and the year you were born.

01-00:00:23

Cobbs: My name is George Cobbs. I was born August 11, 1936.

01-00:00:31

Rigelhaupt: Since the focus of the interview is on the history of the Oakland Army Base, I'm going to ask a couple of questions right off the bat about the Army base, then do some life history questions, and then come back to the Army base.

01-00:00:43

Cobbs: OK.

01-00:00:44

Rigelhaupt: So, to start, what do you recall about your first visit to the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:00:49

Cobbs: Well, I was raised in Oakland, and I knew about the Army base for years, but I had never had the opportunity to go onto the base. So my impression of it was kind of in awe, how much activity, and how big it was.

01-00:01:11

Rigelhaupt: And do you remember what year your first visit to the base was?

01-00:01:16

Cobbs: Probably the latter part of 1965, or the first part of '66. I'd just become a longshoreman in October of '66—'65.

01-00:01:35

Rigelhaupt: And in that first year you started working as a longshoreman, how often did you have to work at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:01:16

Cobbs: We didn't have to work there. It was kind of a choice. In the longshore industry, when you get opportunity, you try to pick the best job that's available from the dispatch. So, on many occasions, when some of the other better jobs that we thought were gone, we would choose the Army base because of the nature of the work.

01-00:02:11

Rigelhaupt: Well, how did the work at the Army base compare to work at other job sites?

01-00:02:16

Cobbs:

At the Army base, most of the work there in those days were palletized loads, where they use a lot of forklifts. You know, like if you were in a different position in the dispatch, you could be working coffee, where you would have to be lifting 150 or 140-pound sacks all day. So, the Army base was kind of a different place to work. It was probably more easy to work there than other job opportunities.

01-00:02:52

Rigelhaupt:

And it was mostly easier because of the type, the way the cargo was packaged?

01-00:02:58

Cobbs:

Unitized, yes. Yes.

01-00:03:08

Rigelhaupt:

So, thinking back to your first visit to the Army base, if it's possible, if you could try and describe how you entered the base, what you saw, what it looked like, maybe about how many people were around?

01-00:03:27

Cobbs:

Well, when you enter in a military installation, it's set up to make certain that you have the proper credentials to get on. They have military along with civil service police, who would check your identity as you enter, and also as you left. So, most time entering the military bases, back in those days, we entered on the bus. You have to take a bus, like from here to wherever you was going—the Army base, the Navy base, or the reefer dock. The bus would leave from the hall here, and that's how you would enter the base, aboard that bus. And then somebody will come aboard and check all of the credentials. At that time, that was kind of different, too. On the other jobs, you didn't have to worry about security, security checks. So that was probably the thing that was different about it.

01-00:04:40

Rigelhaupt:

If you can try and think back to the first time you drove on, what were some of the first things you saw from the bus?

01-00:04:47

Cobbs:

In the Army base, the first thing you see is administration building, and also the cafeteria. And along with some other buildings that I didn't know what it was, and neither did I care. That was what you would see upon entrance. And then, as it started to enter the pier area, then you would be confronted with warehouses and stow, where they stowed the cargo that you were going to load aboard the ship.

01-00:05:22

Rigelhaupt:

Were there always more people around the administration building and the cafeteria than, say, towards the pier where you were working?

01-00:05:30

Cobbs:

Yes. I don't know how many people they employed at the time, but the Army base and all of the military installations, they had a lot more people working than we had, because of what they had to do in preparation for the shipping of the cargo, and also for the receiving of the cargo. I'm not that familiar with what their work procedures was or were. But there was a lot of people. A lot of people worked at the military bases then.

01-00:06:10

Rigelhaupt:

And staying with the years 1965, '66, when you first began your career as a longshoreman, about how many other of your coworkers were at the Oakland Army Base with you the days you were working there?

01-00:06:24

Cobbs:

At the Army base, it could be, it could be hundreds because—I don't know how familiar you are with the Army base, but they had probably seven designations for loading ships. They had six east, six center, six west, seven east, seven center, and seven west, and then they had Pier 8. So they had probably seven to eight designations, where you could have ships. And, in those days, you might have ships at every one of them. Or you would always have ships at at least maybe two or three of them. Of course, they used four gangs in those days. Loading was eight men, and discharging was six. So you could have a couple of hundred guys there.

01-00:07:30

Rigelhaupt:

And did those numbers hold pretty consistent, say, from 1965 to 1975?

01-00:07:37

Cobbs:

Probably. It depends. You'd take, with one ship, one ship could have as many as almost a hundred guys, a hundred people. And then you got to have support. You got to have people who relieved. You got to have people who bringing the cargo to the ship, who all are longshoremen. Many are longshoremen. It depends on which pier, and where they were getting the cargo from. Sometimes, the Civil Service workers would bring the cargo to the designated ship because of the secure areas, so it depends. But it was coordinated between Civil Service and the longshore.

01-00:08:35

Rigelhaupt:

And did you have a sense of the type of cargo that you were loading and unloading in those early years you were working there?

01-00:08:41

Cobbs:

At the Army base? You don't have to have a sense. You were working on a military base. You're loading military cargo. So that is the nature of the beast. That's what you do there. That's what a military base is about.

01-00:08:59

Rigelhaupt:

And in asking about the cargo, did you have a sense you were loading anything that might be more dangerous than at other job sites you worked?

01-00:09:08

Cobbs:

No. Heck, no. Not at the Army base. The Army base is not that kind of facility. You got other bases where—if you are talking about or questioning whether you are loading ammunition, or bombs, or stuff, they don't do that at, they'd never done that at the Army base. They'd load logistical kind of cargo. They could load a whole ship full of Cokes, 7-Ups, soda waters. They could do that. They'd load like tires, the support the material that militaries need all over because they have a lot of equipment. They don't load dangerous stuff at the—none of the local military bases, you know.

01-00:10:03

Rigelhaupt:

Well, let's jump backward a little bit. Where were you born?

01-00:10:08

Cobbs:

Halliday, Arkansas. In Arkansas.

01-00:10:14

Rigelhaupt:

But you said that you grew up in Oakland.

01-00:10:16

Cobbs:

Yes.

01-00:10:17

Rigelhaupt:

What year did you—

01-00:10:19

Cobbs:

1943. I went to elementary, junior high, high school. I went to junior college at Hartnell, and I went to San Jose State. I did two years at Alameda Junior College in the seventies.

01-00:10:40

Rigelhaupt:

So you were about seven years old when your family came to Oakland?

01-00:10:42

Cobbs:

Yes.

01-00:10:43

Rigelhaupt:

What brought your family to Oakland?

01-00:10:46

Cobbs:

Probably the same migration that brought all of the rest of the blacks out of the South to either the West or to the North. You know, you're looking for better opportunities and stuff. And during the war, there was opportunities here, where they needed people to work. So that's probably why my parents come. My dad was only here for a short period of time before he was drafted. So he went into the military.

01-00:11:22

Rigelhaupt:

And did your family immediately settle in Oakland?

01-00:11:25
Cobbs: Yes.

01-00:11:27
Rigelhaupt: Whereabouts?

01-00:11:28
Cobbs: Thirteenth and Woods.

01-00:11:31
Rigelhaupt: So right in the center of West Oakland.

01-00:11:33
Cobbs: Yup.

01-00:11:38
Rigelhaupt: And what did your parents do for work when they first arrived in, in Oakland?

01-00:11:44
Cobbs: My dad work at Naval Supply, the Naval Supply Center. He got a job there, and my dad worked there when he come back from the military until he retired. My mom, she was a laundry worker. She worked at a series of laundries, and I think she finished at Family Laundry Supply in San Leandro.

01-00:12:18
Rigelhaupt: Do you have siblings?

01-00:12:20
Cobbs: One. I have a younger brother. He's sixty-six.

01-00:12:30
Rigelhaupt: Well, thinking about when your family first moved here, what was a typical day like for your father?

01-00:12:38
Cobbs: I don't know. What do you mean?

01-00:12:40
Rigelhaupt: Well, I mean, did he work different shifts? I know that during World War II, there were, I mean—

01-00:12:49
Cobbs: Shift workers. That's right.

01-00:12:50
Rigelhaupt: Twenty-four-hour work at a lot of places.

01-00:12:52
Cobbs: Yes, yes. My dad—you know, that's hard to remember. My dad worked in the daytime, I remember that. So, I don't know. I think, in that period of time, it would be the same. It's like what your parents did. What did they do? So, the

activities and, I guess, the fun that they had were limited, but sometimes that take a life of its own, and then they learn how to enjoy it.

01-00:13:28

Rigelhaupt: What did your father do at the Naval Supply Center before he was drafted?

01-00:13:33

Cobbs: Equipment operator.

01-00:13:35

Rigelhaupt: And did he do similar work while in the military?

01-00:13:38

Cobbs: In the military in those days, the only kind of jobs blacks—men—could have or get would be working as engineers, which meant that they build bridges out before the advancements of the troop, or they was cooks. Or orderlies. So my dad was in the engineering department, which sounds big, but he was just a hard worker who had built roads and stuff.

01-00:14:10

Rigelhaupt: So he served overseas?

01-00:14:12

Cobbs: Yes. My dad served in Germany, and France, and wherever.

01-00:14:18

Rigelhaupt: So he served in Europe, rather than in Asia?

01-00:14:19

Cobbs: Yup. Yup.

01-00:14:22

Rigelhaupt: And was he released from the military soon after the war ended?

01-00:14:27

Cobbs: Yes.

01-00:14:28

Rigelhaupt: And then he returned and did similar work at the Naval Supply Center?

01-00:14:31

Cobbs: Yes.

01-00:14:35

Rigelhaupt: And what was a typical day like for your mother at this, during World War II?

01-00:14:40

Cobbs: Well, during World War II, you would have to be here to see it at night. Where we lived, there was a lot of families lived in this house, and you had your turn where you could use the kitchen. They only had one big kitchen, so everybody had an allotted period of time in there, and they had designated hours. Then they would cook, and they would take the food to your room.

That's all we had was a room during that period of time. So it was probably, she probably felt cluttered, and congested, and crowded, and having to be punctual, and to be able to buy the food. I don't know how familiar you are with what happened in World War II, but you had to have a stamp book and stuff. You could only buy sugar, you could only buy gas, you could only buy lard, you could only buy certain products on the certain day. In order to buy shoes, to had to have a stamp. And I never forgot, it had a tank on there. And if you didn't have that stamp, you could not buy shoes. Things were different. The margarine you bought in those days was white. And you had to get the coloring that go into it before it looked like margarine or butter. So it was different. It was not like walking over to Safeway. It would be similar to women who live and work in the Soviet Union. They have to work, then they have to pick up the groceries, and then they have to get the kids. So their day is full. They don't have a day off, social life. And I'm certain that was what my mom had. She had to do those things to make certain that we were able to eat and to survive.

01-00:16:47

Rigelhaupt: Could you say the name of the elementary school that you started at, again?

01-00:16:51

Cobbs: Prescott.

01-00:16:54

Rigelhaupt: What was it like at the elementary school? And part of the reason I ask is that, from my understanding, schools in the East Bay got very crowded because of so many people moving here—

01-00:17:06

Cobbs: Yes.

01-00:17:07

Rigelhaupt: —during World War II. Did you get a sense the school was crowded, that—

01-00:17:10

Cobbs: Well, at that age, I didn't know crowded from not crowded. You just do. You in an environment that everybody's the same, and the questions that we would ask each other would be different than, you know, is it crowded, and stuff. During World War II, probably the thing that most of us had in common was our dad was gone, and stuff like that. So those would be the questions generally asked. I don't remember even being concerned about crowded, and stuff. In elementary, it's what time you get there, and the recess, and what time you go home. [laughs] And everything else would be kind of incidental, even the learning. I know the basics. I learned the basics, Dick and Jane, and all of that stuff, and Winnie the Pooh, and who is James Thurber. [laughs]

01-00:18:17

Rigelhaupt:

But it wasn't so crowded that they ran double shifts? Because I know in Richmond, at some point, the schools were—there were so many kids, they had to run in two different shifts.

01-00:18:25

Cobbs:

I wouldn't even know that. [laughs] Again, you were about your time that you're supposed to be there, so I'm not really—

01-00:18:38

Rigelhaupt:

Did you have a favorite subject in elementary school?

01-00:18:41

Cobbs:

In elementary? I liked history. I do. I'm a history buff. I've always loved history. I used to read all of the books—not in elementary so much, maybe junior high, you know—with Daniel Boone, and Kit Carson, and all those adventurers, Lewis and Clark. So, as an adult, I pursued that. I've been at Taos a lot of times, and I've been to Kit Carson House. I been to museums all over the world. I've been to museums in Greece, Paris, and Helsinki. Well, they didn't have much of a—but I been to a lot of museums. I've seen a lot of icons. I been to where Trotsky was born in the Soviet Union. I always have pursued history. I like, even up at Victoria, they got a great Native American history museum right there when you first dock. Sob I was always interested, and I read all those books about these people. And I was excited about how they survived, and stuff, especially—Kit Carson, heck, that guy come all to Sacramento and stuff. Fremont would call him, and he would be like, ready to go. I mean, he did a lot of stuff. So that was what my interest was.

01-00:20:33

Rigelhaupt:

And where did you go to high school?

01-00:20:35

Cobbs:

McClymonds, the CIF champion in basketball, 2008. The just won that, state champion. Bill Russell, Frank Robinson, Vada Pinson, Curt Flood—who else? But all of those people went to McClymonds.

01-00:21:02

Rigelhaupt:

Did you have extended family living in the area?

01-00:21:06

Cobbs:

Yes. All of my family, the majority of my family lives here.

01-00:21:11

Rigelhaupt:

So, while you were growing up, you had aunts, uncles, grandparents?

01-00:21:15

Cobbs:

Not grandparents, but aunts and uncles.

01-00:21:19

Rigelhaupt:

And did they move about the same time as your parents?

01-00:21:22

Cobbs:

Yes. That's how I think my aunt—my oldest son—they had come here first. And my oldest son and my dad were very close because it was some years in between their next brothers and sisters, so they grew to be real closely tied to each other.

01-00:21:59

Rigelhaupt:

Thinking backwards, did you have a sense of what you wanted to do after you were done with high school?

01-00:22:06

Cobbs:

No, not really. Not really. I didn't. Sometimes, it's some people, I guess, they grow up in a family where they have a lot of professionals in their family, and they become good role models for them. In my family, my dad worked at Naval Supply. He was a tractor operator, and I'm not saying anything bad about my dad because there were just two, me and my brother. So we had the best of the poor world, the best they had to offer. I mean, we had new clothes, and all that. I had a car when I was sixteen. And also, I was a good football player, so that's how I got to go to college. My outlook on life was kind of skewed by that, but I guess it come real easy, and I thought that's the way life would be. So I had to go through the school of hard knocks to learn that, once you stop playing, then you are just another person who needs a job.

01-00:23:29

Rigelhaupt:

What were some of the things you pursued when you were done playing?

01-00:23:35

Cobbs:

My first job when I finished playing was, I worked at a car wash. And I had a family already started, and so I knew that that was not it, because that job was contingent on the sun shinin', and you have to live every day. So, to make a long story short, I got a job at the Post Office. I worked for the, in the Post Office in Oakland for four or five years. I was a janitor in Montgomery Ward in Oakland. Then I become the janitor foreman. But while I was at the Post Office, I had made the application for this job. And they started, they hired people in '63, and I had forgot all about that I had sent that card in, until in '65 I got a card asking whether I was still interested. And so, from that card in August of '65, 43 years later, I been a part of the ILW.

01-00:25:00

Rigelhaupt:

The post office you worked at, was that the big one on Seventh in Oakland?

01-00:25:04

Cobbs:

No. They hadn't even built that then. I worked at Bayshore Annex. Bayshore Annex is where they did what they do at the big one now. We sorted all of the mail, got it ready for the different stations. When they go out to the stations, it's already bundled and routed. It's already set up for the carrier. I worked as a clerk, so you got to know two stations, and at night, that's what you do after you finish calling the mail, then you go to your station, and you set it up according to the carrier.

01-00:26:00

Rigelhaupt:

Well, what were your first impressions of the ILW when you started worked through the union in 1965?

01-00:26:07

Cobbs:

I made more money in three days than I made in a week, so my impression was one that, of being fulfilled for my work effort. The ILWU is an interesting place. In those days, and still today, it's got a wonderful teaching method. A lot of those old guys who, some didn't read and write well, but they did things experientially. They told you stories, and they were good teachers. They were very, very good teachers, which is what's important on this job because it's dangerous. They had their way of telling you that, don't get yourself killed. You want to leave like to come to this industry, which, a lot of times, we have a lot of injuries, so a lot of people are not fortunate enough to do it. But they would say, like, for example, if you keep standing abreast of the load, and something happens, and then you get yourself killed, then I will have to go home and tell my wife, her money is short because you got killed. And I don't want to do that. And, if you are thinking at all, I thought, I said, goddamn, that's all that you think about is telling his wife the check is short. I'm going to be dead, you know. [laughs] And I remember that story for forty years. It was just one of the ways that they would teach you something about safety that you will never forget it. It's just a story like that, but it's always on your mind. So these guys, they were great. It was a great atmosphere, the best of all worlds. For twenty-five years, I was an officer, but I didn't know which one I liked the best, longshore or being an officer. Great atmosphere, great atmosphere.

01-00:28:27

Rigelhaupt:

As someone interested in history, and the fact this union has such a rich history—

01-00:28:33

Cobbs:

Rich, yes.

01-00:28:34

Rigelhaupt:

What were some of the first things you learned about the history of the union when you first started working in 1965?

01-00:28:43

Cobbs:

That here is a union who knew how to do things, and they put their money where their mouth. That was the thing that I was most impressed with is, they were just not a union that talked about things, but they would do things. They would take on a cause, where there was a good cause, and I liked that about it. I liked the fact that we was not a corrupt union. Here are some people who say things, and then they don't do what they say, only if they're gonna be rewarded. I learned that real early about it, that this union has a great deal of principle about it, and I kind of love that here's a place where you could come and work, and not worry about getting sold out, and stuff. What a wonderful opportunity that I had, to come and to be a part of something that—Harry

Bridges was still here when I come. Harry Bridges was the president another twelve years after I come into this union. I had a lot of opportunity to hear him, and to hear him speak, and to be impressed by a man who had a vision and to see it come into fulfillment. Today, we're still living part of his dream, which is a good thing, a good thing.

01-00:30:36

Rigelhaupt:

Did you immediately start having jobs at the Oakland Army Base when you first started working with the ILW?

01-00:30:45

Cobbs:

Heck, no. I worked on hides. I think my first job was in the freezer. Then I worked hides, then I worked coffee. To get on the military or the Army bases was not easy to get. When you first come, you're low on the totem pole. When they get dispatched, if they got those jobs left, you have to be really lucky. But, in those days, they had a lot of work, so sometimes they would have a lot of that work left. Not until I become an A man, where I had a solid choice of what I wanted to work, or where I wanted to work. But, in those days, you'd take what was left. And if you were fortunate to get over that, then you always loved it because it was a good job, as far as, I never had a bad job over there. Never had a bad job, even when I worked out in the field on the boxcars, or the flatcars. I mean, it's not a hard job. Interesting, but not hard.

01-00:32:01

Rigelhaupt:

Well, speaking of railcars, did you get a sense that the integration of different transportation, as far as ships and rail, that at the Oakland Army Base those were more closely integrated than at other job sites you worked at?

01-00:32:18

Cobbs:

Yes, they were because, a lot of times, if you work in the flatcar, it means that you have something heavy on there. And they have to be removed from that and also put on the ship. For example, like a Caterpillar—you know, a big, dirt-moving Caterpillar. They use huge pieces of machinery, and they come on a long flatbed. So to take it from there, then to put it on the ship, I mean, it takes some know-how. It takes some doing. But they kind of coordinate how they work. Sometimes they'd move the flatcar under the hook, and they'd lift it from the hook to the ship. So, nowadays, in the Army base, especially, the one thing about it, they had the equipment to do what needs to be done. The military could afford to do whatever it needs to be done.

01-00:33:28

Rigelhaupt:

So, in those early years, did you get a sense that the military was using tools and technology that were ahead of other job sites you were working?

01-00:33:41

Cobbs:

Oh, heck, yeah, but only because of necessity. Why would you need heavy equipment to work coffee? You don't. Why would you need heavy equipment to work hides? You don't. You wouldn't need heavy equipment to load, unload pencil slats, which we used to do a lot of in those days. Today, you

don't see that kind of cargo because it's containerized, but they still sell lots of pencils, I'm certain, to these LDC countries and stuff. So, the difference those days and now is, they do containerization. But in those days, it would not be a need for the other jobs to have the kind of equipment you would have on the Army base. You know, they used to do a lot of break bulk cargo. It's loose cargo, so most of it was done by hand rather than on the military, where they did unitized and a lot of palletized cargo. So, it was done by the forklift.

01-00:34:5

Rigelhaupt:

I've read that around 1960 was the big contract with the ILWU that started the containerization. And so, it sounds like, from when you started working, that that hadn't really—it took years to implement.

01-00:35:10

Cobbs:

Yes. You're talking about the M and M [Mechanization and Modernization Agreement]. It was a way that they knew this was coming, what we have today, and they paid the ILWU for the abilities to move ahead with new technology. But yeah, 1960, they were still taking cars over the top. They didn't have these ways, the ships, or the abilities to bring in 4,000 cars at once. When I come, the implementation of what they did in '60 was probably just starting to come off the drawing board.

01-00:35:59

Rigelhaupt:

Could you describe how you saw containerization be implemented, and how it affected your work?

01-00:36:08

Cobbs:

Well, when you talk about containerization and stuff, most of the cargo now goes from door to door. They put it in the container, and they go from door to door. So, how it affects us is a reduced amount of people that you need. They could load a container ship with probably twenty guys, or maybe thirty. In those days, you would need almost that many to do just the gangs. I mean, you would need six to eight gangs to try to load what they could do in a day. You couldn't do what a containerization ship can take in a day. The biggest impact it had is, it reduced the amount of men that you need to load the same amount of cargo.

01-00:37:08

Rigelhaupt:

But, at the same time, the union was hiring, as well. Is that because there was a wave of retirements, or was there just more work?

01-00:37:17

Cobbs:

Probably more work. It was, I think, anticipation that we were going to get all of the work stuffing and un-stuffing the containers, which was partially true. Some of the employers moved the loading of containers out of our jurisdiction, which is fifty miles away. So that didn't happen as anticipated, but we still hired a lot of men between '59 and '69, a lot of men.

01-00:38:08

Rigelhaupt:

Thinking back from your early years working at the Oakland Army Base, did you see any of the technology or integration of rail and ship, or containerization, that you saw earlier at the Oakland Army Base, become implemented at other job sites over the years?

01-00:38:28

Cobbs:

Even the Army base, in those days, when I come, they only had four cranes in the whole Bay Area. That's all they had. The Army, the closest thing they had to containerization was CONEXs [container express, military shipping containers], which, these were container-like, which they could fit into the hold of a ship without having the ship being fitted to accept them. So that probably was the beginning of containerization. The Army would put different cargos in these CONEXs. But the military wasn't the first one that come with the ships and stuff. The SeaLand and Matson—Matson serving Hawaii, and SeaLand serving I guess the rest of the world. But they're the first one who had the technology—the cranes, and all of that stuff.

01-00:39:42

Rigelhaupt:

Could you describe some of the different jobs that people in the ILW did at the Oakland Army Base? Local 10 is the longshore local, and then Local 34 is—

01-00:39:58

Cobbs:

The clerks. You can't work a ship without a clerk. You've got to have a clerk. You've got to have a sup of [superintendent of] cargo in order to work a ship. You got to have a walking boss. A walking boss is the person who tells the men what to do. Superintendents do not have a contractual right to tell men what to do. The clerks just tell the men what cargo goes on and makes certain that the cargo that is listed goes aboard this ship. The sup of cargo's overall job is to make certain that the cargo is loaded in the right hatch, the right cargo is loaded in the right hatch, the right cargo is taken from the right pile. That is his job. It's a coordinated effort between all. They're just not, like you go to work, and you just work. They have a reason and a purpose. They all work together in a coordinated effort to make certain that whatever the ship is gets the cargo that has been duly selected for it.

01-00:41:14

Rigelhaupt:

Did you get a sense that, at the Army base, the coordination was more difficult, easier, or similar to other job sites?

01-00:41:26

Cobbs:

Oh, yeah. Well, it could be more difficult because now you've got to deal with the military's coordination of what they—And so, they have their people, and they work in kind of—I can't think of the right name for the room, but he clerks have a big room where they've got all of this stuff laid out, and so the military people make certain that you load what's supposed to be loaded, too. So they worked co-jointly, or jointly, on it to make certain that the ship was getting, again, the proper cargo. Any time you go in the military, they've got

their own people who tell you what to do, and where they want it, and what hatch. So, that has already been worked out with the clerks and the sup of cargo.

01-00:42:27

Rigelhaupt:

As far as the military telling longshoremen where and how to load, did you get a sense that there were different safety regulations at military installations?

01-00:42:41

Cobbs:

Oh, heck, yeah. Yeah. You can't smoke, and none of those kind of things. And probably not because it was something that could explode. Probably the most apparent reason is that, if you start a fire, or create a fire, or something like that, that would create more havoc than anything. It would change the whole focus of what they have to do. But, yeah, they have different requirements, and stuff.

01-00:43:19

Rigelhaupt:

But as a worker at the job site, did you have a sense that any work you were doing there was more dangerous or less safe than other job sites you were at?

01-00:43:29

Cobbs:

No. No. Nope, I can't remember, and I think you asked me that once before. But they don't have, like, explosives and stuff over there at the Army base, that I can recall. You know, if you want to work where it's dangerous, you're going to make a lot of money if you go to, like, Port Chicago, and those places. That's where the danger lies, but not at the Army base.

01-00:44:04

Rigelhaupt:

Did you ever work out at Port—

01-00:44:06

Cobbs:

Heck, no. [laughs] Nope. Never worked. I had a family, and kids.

01-00:44:18

Rigelhaupt:

As far as environmental regulations go, I've certainly read that the military has different rules than, say, private corporations, as far as environmental stuff goes. Did you get a sense, as a worker at the Army base, that there was any different environmental policies in play?

01-00:44:40

Cobbs:

No. Heck, no. You know, as a worker, they got other people who worry about that kind of thing, so I don't remember ever hearing any kind of consideration of that.

01-00:45:01

Rigelhaupt:

And certainly one of the things the ILW has been able to do is put environmental and safety regulations, and it's always part of the contract.

01-00:45:10

Cobbs: Oh, yeah. That's in a lot of years. We worked around asbestos and didn't even know it, but now we know about it.

01-00:45:19

Rigelhaupt: Did you ever hear about any grievances or anything that came up at the Oakland Army Base around safety or environmental issues?

01-00:45:28

Cobbs: Nope. No.

01-00:45:41

Rigelhaupt: So in the years you started working for the ILWU and at the Oakland Army Base, the Vietnam War was already underway. It ended in 1975, but it probably had been winding down for a few years before that. Did you get a sense that the activity at the Oakland Army Base slowed as the Vietnam War was winding down?

01-00:46:00

Cobbs: Oh, heck yeah. [laughs] Yes. That was the Army base and the Naval Supply's job, was to supply Southeast Asia. So, yes, as the war wound down, so did the work. Those were years where we had a lot of work because of that, because of what was going on in Vietnam. Which also supported a lot of other industries, too, not just the ILWU and stuff. Any time there's a war, it's a lot of other people who benefit from the overflow of the work, we did. We could tell when it was slowing down.

01-00:46:56

Rigelhaupt: Interestingly, the ILWU was very vocally opposed to the Vietnam War. And I'm just wondering if you had any discussions with co-workers, or anything about what it was like working at an Army base, supplying a war that some of the union leadership, at least, was opposed to.

01-00:47:17

Cobbs: No. Nope, I didn't. Also, too, the thing about being in the union, you kind of learn how to be disciplined, and to leave those kind of things to the people who are in charge. We've got people who are in charge, and let them deal with the nuances of the environment, or the war, and stuff. We heard all of the protests, and stuff, but what are you going to do?

01-00:47:56

Rigelhaupt: In another interview I did on the Oakland Army Base—I interviewed Cleophas Williams yesterday, and he mentioned that one of the hard things about working there during the Korean War and during the Vietnam War was that returning soldiers' bodies were also part of the cargo. And I'm wondering if you have any memories about that, and if you had any discussions about what it was like to have to confront the reality of war in that way.

01-00:48:27

Cobbs:

Yeah. Well, when you work in the capacity where you ship and you receive, you're going to see all kinds of stuff. Also, Cleophas was the first black president, so he sees the environment in a whole different pair of eyes than I because he had certain responsibility, and he was in a position where he needed to give some sort of retort to what it is that he sees. As a worker, it's a container, it's a casket, you unload it. And you put it where it's supposed to be. I'm not saying that people are cold, and hardened, and callous, but what do you do with that? I think that sadness registered with most people, including myself, when I read in the paper at that time, prior to ever seeing a casket, I know. It's like the war in Iraq or Afghanistan. People are getting killed, and those bodies are coming back somewhere. I guess the bottom line was just, that was what we did, is, unload the bodies with out registering—I didn't want to go to Vietnam and kill somebody because I've seen a body. Why would I do that? You know what I mean? I just believe that intelligent people need to deal with things intelligently, and let's look for an intelligent solution. I think sometimes, when people protest, it's like a Trotskyite. It's people who know how to make noise, but they have no solution, none. And I never like where people don't have solutions.

01-00:50:34

Rigelhaupt:

Did you get a sense of how connected the Oakland Army Base was to the broader West Oakland community?

01-00:50:42

Cobbs:

It had real significance because a lot of the people who lived in West Oakland worked there. And when they closed that down, there was a loss of jobs—not only the history, but it affected West Oakland with economics. I mean, a lot of people lost jobs. The same is like the Naval Supply, where my dad worked. I had an aunt who worked there, too, and when they closed down, they lost their job. I had friends who—I still have got friends who worked in Naval Air, and when they closed down, they had twenty years there, and, boom. They just closed it, and they lost their job. It affects military bases—and they're designed to do that. Congressmen, that's what their job is, to try to bring in military, as much money as they can to their community so that they can have full employment, or as full an employment as they could get. If you look at powerful senators, powerful Congressmen, look at their state. They've got plenty of military.

01-00:52:02

Rigelhaupt:

What did you think of the decision to close the Army base?

01-00:52:07

Cobbs:

At the time, I was doing another job in the union, so I wasn't really paying attention, and I knew that the military needed to supply their overseas operation and that, even though we don't work at the Army base, we would still be able to work at SeaLand, or whoever had the contract. So it wouldn't affect us that much, and it hasn't.

01-00:52:48

Rigelhaupt:

What were some of the other types of jobs that people from West Oakland did at the Oakland Army Base who weren't doing longshore work?

01-00:52:57

Cobbs:

Starting from the basics, any major military base and stuff where you have intercommunication, you've got people who work. They've got their own little post office, so you've got people who drive around and delivering. You've got the cafeteria, where they hire lots of people so that they feed the people who work on the base. They have the Civil Service security, which I don't know how big a force they had, but that was lots of people. Then you've got people constantly transferring cargo from one pier to the other, so they're pulling stuff. So they've got tractor drivers, these small, Jeep-type tractors. So I guess they do a multitude. They've got people who sweep, who clean, keep the base clean, and stuff. So they had a lot of ways they could hire a lot of people. That's what military bases do. They hire a lot of people.

01-00:54:14

Rigelhaupt:

In those early years you worked there, I know that a number—well, I don't know the exact number, but a lot of soldiers shipped out and returned from Vietnam through the Oakland Army Base. Did you ever interact with any of the soldiers?

01-00:54:28

Cobbs:

No. No. Neck, no. You're doing work, or you're going to go home.

01-00:54:35

Rigelhaupt:

So there was a pretty clear division between—

01-00:54:38

Cobbs:

Oh, yeah.

01-00:54:39

Rigelhaupt:

—people working there and the soldiers waiting to ship out—

01-00:54:42

Cobbs:

Yes.

01-00:54:43

Rigelhaupt:

—or being discharged through there.

01-00:54:45

Cobbs:

Yeah.

01-00:55:20

Rigelhaupt:

Well, what do you think the future for the Oakland Army Base should be? It's still up in the air, as far as—

01-00:55:12

Cobbs:

Right, right, right. Well, I've heard several stories. One is that, they are going to make a commercial dock out of it, that I think people are fighting to do that.

The other is, these developers want to put—you know, any time you've got beach front or oceanfront properties, they want to build some residential units and stuff there. Then the other thing is, the former mayor wanted to put a casino over there. So, it's a valuable piece of property that they haven't decided, I guess, what they're going to do. It makes it look like a development that would create more work for us is probably going to be the opportunity that's going to land on the Army base, for the simple reason that, right now because of the crisis in this country, nobody's going to build homes you can't sell. And also, the casino, too many people that are adverse to that. So it looks like people probably are more in favor of having some development there that will create jobs.

01-00:56:38

Rigelhaupt: And certainly an expansion of the port would—

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Cobbs: Yes, yes.

01-00:56:41

Rigelhaupt: —would do that.

01-00:56:42

Cobbs: Yup.

01-00:56:45

Rigelhaupt: Do you have a sense, would all the rail lines already coming into the Oakland Army Base be beneficial to the shipping companies?

01-00:56:55

Cobbs: Oh, heck yeah. That's the thing that makes it difficult for San Francisco. They don't have the railroad like they have in Oakland. Inter-modally, that's what it means. It's like you intertwine all of these travel activities into one. You see all these automobiles, these trains carrying these thousands of cars, and stuff? Well, they don't have any problem with that in Oakland. They have the access to the railway, and cargo can be quickly moved, rather than stacked up in one location here. So Oakland is, I think, ideal. I think the Army base would be ideal for that.

01-00:57:52

Rigelhaupt: The last question is, did you notice any changes at the Oakland Army Base during the first Gulf War in 1991?

01-00:58:0

Cobbs: I was doing something different, so I never—I haven't been on the Army base, probably in the seventies, been in the middle or early seventies.

01-00:58:27

Rigelhaupt: Those were largely my questions. And the way I always like to end is to ask one, is there anything I should have asked that I didn't? Or is there anything you'd like to add that you think is important about the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:58:38

Cobbs:

No, I just hate to see all of them close. We used to have a lot of work at the reefer dock, Naval Supply, and the Army base, and I guess their reason for closing it is a valid one. But I think not only the work we lost, but the work opportunities for people living in the area, it's now gone, and so, how do they support themselves? I think that we're fortunate in one respect. We're not a single industry town, like some of the rustbuckets in Pennsylvania, and those places. But, yet and still, the atmosphere is not [laughs] as such where they have plenty of jobs. So, I just hate to see this area that I love, you know, lose that kind of employment opportunity. I hope when I die that I'll be in a reasonable proximity of the Bay Area because I'm an ultra-liberal Democrat, and this area here, no matter what it is or who you are, you ain't gonna win unless you won us. So it serves all of my needs.

01-00:60:10

Rigelhaupt:

I think that's a nice place to end. Thank you.

01-00:60:12

Cobbs:

All right.

[End of Interview]