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The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Freddie Meeks: Port Chicago Oral History Project

Interviews conducted and donated by
Robert Allen
in 1980

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Freddie Meeks, Freddie Meeks: Port Chicago Oral History Project”
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Freddie Meeks was one of the fifty men charged with mutiny in 1944 after refusing to return to unsafe working conditions loading ammunition at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine after a massive explosion killed more than 300 sailors. He was originally a shipyard welder from Memphis and was drafted into the US Navy in 1943 during World War Two. Meeks was stationed in Port Chicago as a winch operator and was held at San Pedro federal prison for his mutiny conviction until his discharge in 1946. Meeks then moved to Los Angeles, where he started his family and returned to civilian work. In this interview, Meeks talks about the following topics: the dangerous working conditions and lack of training for loading ammunition; racism and segregation in the Navy during World War Two; the aftermath of the explosion on the base; poor treatment of the Port Chicago fifty in detention; the trial and appeals with Thurgood Marshall; and his civilian life and career after.

Interview 1: August 24, 1980

Meeks: Yeah, just as I was saying, I just don't believe that it was a sabotage. I believe it came from explosion of one of them boxcars. We used to run the winches and we get like—play with them, you know—get a load, and swing them over the hatch, and let them drop so far, and then slam on the darn brakes. And then, when I first went there, we worked on the ship loads, unloading torpedoes and bombs and let them son-of-a-gun roll down the runway, you know. When they get to the bottom, they would hit and you were supposed to grab them and this scared you to death—

Allen: When they pulled them off the boxcar?

Meeks: See, when we come down, when they'd see they come down, when they bring them up and bring them to the ship and they'd load them down just like a slide, just like that. They'd slide down in that darn thing and you's supposed to catch them. And, man, some of them would hit and I— I thought they was going to explode, I can tell you the truth. Me and a lot of the guys were scared to death because they thought—they said, well, they don't have no warheads on them, no detonators, so they won't explode. But, to me, I believe this—the explosion, the killing, was by running them darn bombs down the runway, and somebody probably just didn't catch one, and it probably hit and exploded. See?

Allen: Sure.

Meeks: But we was on this same ship that same day.

Allen: The one that blew up.

Meeks: The one that blew up—we had been down loading that ship and, God, we was on that first ship to load it, and when we come off we marched back and we was singing. And the guys that got blown away was standing on the side, waving and going on—that's the way we did, you know. So some rode down in trucks and some, most of them, they'd make you march back, see? And we passed them up and that's the last time we saw them alive was that day. And we left and went to town on leave and when the ship blew up, then they sent out a radio call all over, you know, for all the guys to come back to the base. Yeah, that was a miserable sight.

Allen: So, you weren't actually there when the explosion—

Meeks: No—

Allen: But you came back to the base right afterwards?

Meeks: Yeah.

Allen: What was it like when you came back?

Meeks: Oh, things was tore up—glass, windows blowed out. Some of the guys got cut You know, guys that was sleeping in the barracks and things. It was a horrible mess, but—and then, you know, we had this damn watch, you know, they put them in them warehouses like we had them warehouses, huts, like you know where they store stuff—and then there was no heads on the bodies in there, some of them blowed half in two, and some no heads, no arms and stuff. It was just— it was a horrible mess. But then after a while, where the big ruckus come on, why the guys got mad was because they promised us after we had gotten back, we clean up the work, that they was going to give us a thirty day leave. But they didn't. See, some of the white boys got theirs and so the guys was just pretty fed up about it and they began to—the Rear Admiral, he made a statement. And we was in—what's the name—that commissary, over there where you go eat, you know, where you could go and buy stuff—

Allen: Like the chow hall or the mess hall?

Meeks: Wasn't the mess hall but, you know, a place where you could in there and buy stuff. Candy and stuff. So he come in there one day and made the statement: he said, well—he made a hell of a statement about that little white cap they'd been wearing.

Allen: The white cap?

Meeks: Yeah, sailor cap. He says, "Hell, you ought to be damn glad to be wearing that—that you can wear that little white cap." And he was a Rear Admiral! Full of shit, man. It was—but the thing about it is, it was—the guy was fair enough. It was mad, and seeing there was so much prejudiced there. See, the white boys stayed in one barracks and we stayed in one barracks. And when they went to eat first, we go eat second. See, they were marched to eat first and then we marched down to eat second. But then, after they didn't want to give us a leave, so shit, we just got together and said we didn't want to go back to work. We didn't want to go back to work. So, they had a meeting over to—let's see—we went to, I think we went to Mare Island, I believe we went to Mare Island and had a big meeting there that day. And we want to find out who all was going to go back to work, and who wasn't going to go back to work. All of them staying over there and so, so he said, hell, all of them that wasn't going to go back to work that they should—he made the statement that we all should have been shot.

- Allen: This is the Admiral again?
- Meeks: Yeah. That's it. He said that we should have been shot, court-martialed and shot, before a firing squad. But that didn't deter the guys' minds. They didn't change. Some of them changed and went back, but the ones that changed they shanghaied them on out to sea.
- Allen: Yeah, yeah.
- Meeks: And then they labeled us as the forty-nine Port Chicago negroes, and then they shipped us on out to Goat Island. That's up there by Frisco. Yeah, that's down by—that's down off of this subway track down on the Island there almost to Alcatraz, but it's not—but see you can come down the steps—
- Allen: You're talking about Treasure Island, Yerba Buena Island is it?
- Meeks: Yeah, yeah. You see, we were right there. At that time they called it Goat Island, see, and that's where we was. And they treated us like dogs! It was tough! I seen days when they take us out for work details, they would take us right—the Navy had a station right near, about four or five S.P.'s, M.P.'s be there. And so, they would be in their little shack, they'd come out and—see, the Marines have one or two guards—they would make up pick butts up off of a—butts, ah, off of a—sorry.
- Allen: Okay.
- Meeks: And so, as I was telling you, they used to make us pick up cigarette butts off the ground on our hands and knees; we'd be crawling. I guess they wanted to get back at us and show us all what—
- Allen: This was before the trial or—
- Meeks: No, this was after—this was during the trial. See, because we had a trial after we went to Goat Island; that's when, we started having the trial right there, see, when we was on Goat Island—that's where we was during the trial. But then we had work details days that they didn't have trial, they'd put us on work details. And man, them cats would work you and get us out and make us run up and down the hill 'till you almost dropped. And then they'd just dare you to try to break away, so that maybe they'd get a chance to shoot one of us. But we always said, "hell, we ain't going to make no break for it—we going to see it out, tough it out." I seen them up there while we was up there—they didn't do nothing to us like that but they did—some of them white guys—they used to be Marines—they'd make them wash their face in the toilet.

- Allen: Just trying to degrade you in any way they could.
- Meeks: Yeah, they degraded you. But they didn't do us like this because we all—we all got together and we talked and we said we wasn't going to give them no reason to have to punish us or to put them on detail. And me, I always got by pretty good and kept the guys together because, see, at that time, you know, always talking Christian stuff and they kind of took a liking to me, I don't know why. And even the Marines, they kind of took a liking to me and if they wanted to tell the guys something, they'd call me and I would tell them about it, you know. So we got along pretty good with them until we had to go out on them details and—shit!—it was a holy mess. But I just can't tell you everything that went on at the trial, what was said, because it's been so long and then, at that time, we was so bitter. We was real bitter about the thing and then they herded us down like we was cows and sheep and everything, and took us off the train and pick us out. I guess they let them know that we was the forty-nine of Port Chicago. But, after we got down here at San Pedro, you know I never have saw that place since I left there—
- Allen: Oh, no?
- Meeks: And never have, as long as I've been here, I never have been back there—
- Allen: Don't blame you.
- Meeks: —to see that son-of-a-gun.
- Allen: Is it still there?
- Meeks: Oh, yeah. The federal prison, it's still down there.
- Allen: Let me ask you to just back up a little bit. How—when did you go into the service and kind of just a little bit about your background? You came out here from Memphis?
- Meeks: Yeah, and I went in the service on August '43.
- Allen: So you were drafted, or you enlisted or—
- Meeks: Yeah, well, they drafted me. I had registered when I was in Memphis, but then they drafted me, and I was working for the shipyard and I had gotten one deferment. So—the next one they got, they want to give me a deferment, I wouldn't take it because I say, "Well, they know I got to dance to your music if I want to get another job." And if I quit—see, what they then do is they turn you in and you be drafted right off.

- Allen: Right away, yeah.
- Meeks: They take you right on in. I say, ah the hell with them, I'm just going on in and take my chances.
- Allen: So you were working in a shipyard as a what—you were a welder?
- Meeks: I was welder. Yeah, I was a welder at that time.
- Allen: So, you went into the service and that was August and you went up to Great Lakes. What was that like up at Great Lakes then?
- Meeks: It was nice. It was nice when we went to Great Lakes. We had a black instructor where I was, and they treated us nice in there. We were trained, and then we would stand duty and—
- Allen: What was the training like? What kind of training did they have there?
- Meeks: We mostly we did— we stood guard—like they had a—like a great big barrack, a big auditorium where all the big shots come in, you know. And so we had to stand watch there because we didn't do—we went out on in the boats—out in the rowboats, maybe two or three times, that's all. And then, mostly we did was march and we drill with the rifles and things like that. But we never did—we never did fire rifles when we was in there.
- Allen: Well, when you want in, what did you expect? Well, what was your expectation when you got drafted and you were training at Great Lakes? What did you expect—where did you expect to wind up in the Navy?
- Meeks: Well, I expected to wind up aboard a ship, you know, that was what I wanted to. I did want to go on submarine duty. I wanted to go to Seattle, Washington, but I guess fate just played a trick. And I went to—come on out here to Port Chicago.
- Allen: Did you have any idea you were going to Port Chicago before you actually got there?
- Meeks: No, because they didn't tell us where we were going to go. They had three places to go. They had three or two places—Seattle—and then they was coming over here and, let's see, one other place—two, I think it was two or three, I don't know. At that time—because what they did—they had us in a group and they call all names and who was going where. And we got in this group to come to Port Chicago.
- Allen: What was your first impression of Port Chicago when you arrived? Do you remember anything about—what struck you about it?

Meeks: You didn't have much of a feeling. You just know it was a way-out place. You know you was going to an ammunition dump. See, you knew you was going to an ammunition dump, and, well, when you got there— well, you know, they greeted you and they assigned you to your barracks and things like that and gave you instructions. But, I don't know, it was just like ordinary life. You know you was in the service, and it was segregated, just like it was so—

Allen: I don't think I asked you a good deal about that, you know, because actually everybody loading the ammunition, they were black men; right? And the officers were all white? How did the men feel about that?

Meeks: Well, I don't know—you know, it was a funny thing. The guys didn't feel too bad about it because we got leave to go—and we'd have fun. We did our own thing, you know, so they didn't feel too bad about it. But the only thing that got them mad was when they turned them down on that thirty-day leave after everything was cleared up. Then they said, "No, you cannot have that thirty-day leave." This is what made the guys mad after they done that work around there getting things straightened out and then they turned them down. And so, they just agreed not to go back to work.

Allen: What was the work itself like? You talked about that a little bit earlier. You became a winch operator?

Meeks: Well, I operate a winch and then I help them load them doggone bombs on there.

Allen: Work in the hold or—

Meeks: Yeah, working in the hold, and that's where they scared you to death down in them holds.

Allen: Yeah, what was that like?

Meeks: Looking like you going to be blowed to pieces. I really think that's what caused me to have high blood pressure, because I never had high blood pressure before. And when I came out of the service, my blood pressure was so high, the first time I was going to get discharged that they wouldn't even discharge me. I should have got me a medical—but at that time I was young and still bitter. I was quite bitter for a long time after I come out of the service, and my wife told me, "Don't talk about it." So you know, she figured that it might hurt me some way, you know, people knowing that I had been in prison and I was one of them Port Chicago Negroes. Nobody knew about it—my family, my son—they are here and don't even know about it—

- Allen: Oh, is that so?
- Meeks: Yeah, the only one know is my daughter. He don't even know it. Or all the rest of them. Only two people out here know about it. Yeah, my family and my brothers, they know about it. My cousin and his wife, they know about it, but that's all—nobody else. I never talked about it. I even did away with the procedures that I had, you know, the great big procedure—
- Allen: Oh, that transcript or whatever?
- Meeks: Yeah, I have one. Everybody—all of us have one. They gave us all one, but about ten, twelve years ago I took and burned mine up {inaudible}—should have kept it, though. But I figured—I said, “What the heck. It's in the past, it's gone.” But I really don't know what to fill you in on because, you know, it's hard to think back; because we went to trial for about thirty-three days—
- Allen: It was about—yeah, over a month.
- Meeks: —about thirty-three days we was in trial. Thurgood Marshall, he fought—if it don't be for him, I don't know what would have happened.
- Allen: Now, he came to the trial. Did you get a chance to meet with him or talk with him, or what? What happened when you went to trial?
- Meeks: Yeah, we got a chance to talk with him, ask him a few questions. You know, what we could.
- Allen: And what was he saying?
- Meeks: Well, he just said, “Play it cool.” And he was working, he was working on it. But the guys felt good when he came because we could see him. We could see him, and he battled with— And he really did go to bat for us, because if it don't be for him, I don't know what them might do. They might would of got a chance to shoot us—
- Allen: Well, he took up the appeal after, because it was Navy lawyers who was handling the case originally; right. And then—he took up the—
- Meeks: Yeah, and then they got him. I don't know who got him to do it. I don't know who got him to take it up. I had thought about, when he got sick, though about sending him a card, you know. The time he was sick and let him know that I was one of them. But then I said “No, let bygones be bygones.” But sometimes I think, you know, people hold

things in them too long, and they hold back and don't let the world know what's been happening—

Allen: Right, yeah, that has to be done.

Meeks: What my wife was afraid of—things may get out, may hurt my son by, you know, the police force or something like that, you know— But I don't know too much to tell you about, you know, what really happened.

Allen: Well, let me just—one of the things I'm interested in is what the situation was like there on the base before the explosion. Like the guys—now, how did the guys—the guys know they were handling ammunition and there was some danger in that, I guess. So, how did they feel? Did they feel it was dangerous or there was a risk or—

Meeks: Oh, yeah, they felt like it was dangerous. It felt like one of them dumps, where the magazine might someday blow up and blow everybody to kingdom come. 'Cause they loaded lot of ammunition and magazines.

Allen: But there was never any explosion or accident before the big one?

Meeks: No. There was nothing. Didn't nothing never happen before that thing was— you go to work, work on that darn ship, load it, come back, go to your barracks, stretch out, take a shower. I seen the guys just, you know, gamble, go over the commissary— and they just messed around. They go in bars, you know, and they play ball and stuff like that, you know. They just did whatever you want on your own time; and like, on the weekend, you get leave and you go to Frisco, Stockton—some of them went to Stockton—and Vallejo. They just went all about, you know. You could ride the bus cheap—thirty-five or forty cents, something like that. And some of the guys would work—like I used to work down near the—in Martinez, California. Let's see, I don't know it was a Shell, or whatever—one of them oil stations. I mean, one of them—

Allen: The big refineries down there—

Meeks: Yeah, yeah. We used to go down there and make extra money and work on your off days. Oh, yeah, they let you go down there and work, and some guy would go to town. And now you go to town and get your seventy-two hour leave. Then we could stay at the U.S.O, places for twenty-five cents. You go there and eat. Oh, it was good, yeah.

Allen: What about promotions and ratings, and so on?

- Meeks: Oh, shit, you didn't get no promotions. Forget it! You were {inaudible} I went in as a Seaman second class and I come out as a seaman. Now, when I got on the U.S.S. Caulkwood— on the ship, they asked me to change, saying you won't have to stand no watches. You won't have to do no duty. I say, forget it. I say, I want to stay just where I am. I come in as a seaman and I want to leave out as a seaman, see? And it was myself, and there was another black guy and he was a steward. See? But I told them I wasn't going to be no steward so I wanted to be a seaman. But they all knew—some of them, they knew that I had been with that Port Chicago group so I didn't have no trouble getting along.
- Allen: And this was after you were released from San Pedro then that you were on the Caulkwood?
- Meeks: Yeah, uh-huh.
- Allen: Yeah. So the—the men were—the work was going on and there was the explosion. And then you came back and worked on the base for a while after that?
- Meeks: Yeah, right, worked on the base. Mostly, we had to stand watch. We had to stand watch over all them bodies—all them bodies they'd have to—
- Allen: Yeah.
- Meeks: —all them bodies at that time.
- Allen: What was the pace of the work like before the explosion, the loading and so on?
- Meeks: Well, it was just like ordinary loading an ordinary ship, you know. You had some stuff to load on to get them ships out, get them ready, see? You had to load them up to get them ready to go.
- Allen: Was there any competition, rivalry, anything like that?
- Meeks: Well, I don't know. Some—you had different ones, I guess, with them running them darn winches and things, you know. You get them—you got to unload them out and you get to take it easy, see? So, you had competition in that way—what you got things going what you had to do, and just take it easy—
- Allen: What about the safety precautions? Were there any safety procedures or safety precautions there on the dock?

Meeks: Well, I don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't know what kind of safety precautions they had at that time. Just to get that stuff on there and you couldn't of had no safety precautions, because of the way they loaded that stuff down the runway they had and the way they was banging, you couldn't call that safe, see?

Allen: No.

Meeks: That thing, that bomb could have exploded at any time and blowed everybody to kingdom come. I didn't see nothing about safety. About the safest way they had it was when they bring them down in the winch, when they let them down in the winch; but they was rolling them down—shit, there was no safety!

Allen: Had anybody had any training for that kind of work?

Meeks: No, no. You didn't have no training. They just brought you in and showed you—taught you a little something and turned you loose.

Allen: What about winch operators? Like you were a winch operator. Was there any training for the winch operators?

Meeks: No, no. There was no training. You just got a little training from the—say, like if I know you—and you was running the winch, you say—say, “Joe, I want to run that winch.” So I show you how to handle them levers. One is slack on one that make the wheel turn, and pick it up and stuff and show you a little bit and turn you loose. But they didn't—no they didn't have no instructors there to really teach you. They may have taught them, I don't know. But see, some of the guys was already there when we got there.

Allen: Yeah, yeah. So, afterwards then, you stayed at Port Chicago, and at some point you were shipped down to Mare Island? And they were going to order you back to load another ship?

Meeks: No, no, we didn't go down there to load a ship. We went down there for the big meeting to find out who was going back to work and who wasn't. That's why we went down there. And then after they had the big meeting, the ones that wasn't going to go—they was going to stay there in this ship for some to go to Goat Island. And the others, they was going to leave from there and they was going to send them out on ships, send them overseas.

Allen: Uh-huh. Now, the big meeting, that's the one where the Admiral spoke to all the men—that the one you're talking about?

Meeks: Yeah, yeah.

- Allen: Well, before that, how did—before they called that meeting, had there been—had the officers said you were going back to work? How did you know that you were going back to work?
- Meeks: Well, let's see now. It's hard to remember all this stuff this time because I know there had been a lot of rumors and talk—
- Allen: Among the men themselves?
- Meeks: Yeah, about how they didn't want to go back to work under those conditions because they hadn't treated us right, see; and that they were letting them white boys go home for thirty-day leaves, and we wasn't getting nothing; see? So the guys was attentive towards them, see; they was just going. So, they just cut off all the leaves, see all the leaves. But anyway— don't' really have too much to fill you up on, because things happened, and then they sent us up there and then they had that long trial. After the trial was over, then they found us guilty—then they sent us to San Pedro. Then they sent us on down there and we stayed down there until— '45. We stayed down there until '45. Some of them they shipped them out and some of them, while they was there, they went out on other ships and worked. But I never did because, see, I had broke my arm and I stayed there all the time, then I worked for the officers' mess.
- Allen: So, you didn't get shipped out overseas with the—when the others did? How did you break your arm? What happened? This is when you were boxing?
- Meeks: Yeah, and so I think I'm about the only one that stayed—
- Allen: I think you are, because everybody else that I've talked to, they've told me about going back—I guess they mainly got shipped over to Guam, and then to New Caledonia and some other places.
- Meeks: Some of them went to Japan and—oh, I guess, maybe some of them went to Okinawa. But I'm about the only one that didn't go overseas and I stayed here.
- Allen: Yeah. When the men said they weren't going to go back to loading ammunition and beyond that point, what did you think was going to happen to you?
- Meeks: Well, I really didn't know what was going to happen to us. We didn't have no idea of what was going to happen to us, what they was going to do. See, the guys would have went back if they had give them their leave. If they had given that thirty-day leave like they said, they would have gone back to work. But, other than that, they wasn't going. They

didn't care what happened. They said, well, if they shoot us, they just shoot us, that's all, because they didn't want to go back to work.

Allen: Yeah. Did you expect the mutiny charge or was that—did anybody expect that might happen?

Meeks: No, we didn't really—

Allen: Yeah, I was asking if the men expected that charge, that mutiny charge.

Meeks: No, I don't think they thought they were going to put a mutiny charge on us, because we didn't think it was going to develop into nothing that big. We figured that maybe they may discharge us, or something. Now, they did try to give us a dishonorable discharge, but we didn't—now, I wound up there with unhonorable discharge under honorable condition, which is just like an honorable discharge. Because you have all the benefits that anybody else with an honorable discharge would get. The only difference between they didn't have that really pretty discharge. They have one written on that say under honorable conditions.

Allen: But you got the benefits?

Meeks: Oh, yeah, we got all the benefits, all the benefits that the veterans get. Yeah. I could have been on a hundred percent disability if I had went to the hospital when the doctor wanted to put me in there. But I didn't go, so that's when I wind up—I didn't get it.

Allen: Do you remember—this would have been, I guess, just before the trial, they had some kind of investigation or interrogation when they called the men in to talk to them? Do you remember anything about that?

Meeks: Yeah, they did.

Allen: What was that? What was going on there?

Meeks: Well, they wanted to find out, you know, was you going to go back, what you were going to do, you know. At that time, you know— this is hard to relate everything that really happened at that time because, now, you take— that was thirty-six years ago. So now, it's kind of hard to go from now, back—

Allen: Back in the past, sure.

Meeks: —and to remember everything that really took place. Because you look back in your mind—and your mind was wondering— you had a little fear in your mind that really what was going to happen. And then,

after that happened, then they put all the Marines around the base, guarding the base— to try to make sure that none of us tried to escape. You know, so, it was really hard to go through all of that stuff.

- Allen: Well, when you look back on it now, how do you feel about it?
- Meeks: Well, I don't know. I tell you we got a raw deal because we missed out on a lot of pay, a lot of pay that we didn't get for while we serve all that time. And we didn't get that pay, back pay, and like that after we was turned loose and put back into service. And I felt it was not fair—that we should have got that back pay, but we didn't get it. Well, you look back on it, you feel like you got a kind of raw deal on it. And the way they hound us every day, treated us— and then they talk about their own prisoners of war and how the other countries treated them. You see, we was kind of bitter, too, because the way we was being treated, only because we was black. I guess I wanted to set an example for the rest of them, you know, by us being back there because the rest would try to—
- Allen: Yes, I think so. Did you feel that the men did the—that this was the right thing to do under the circumstances?
- Meeks: Well, I don't know whether it was the right or wrong thing at that time, you know. We was in the service—maybe we shouldn't have did it. But then too, again, then maybe we should, to try to bring out the wrongs in the Navy that they was doing— the way they treated us—the way they treated the blacks at that time, see? So, when you talk about—you was talking about ratings. We asked about ratings, and they say, "Forget it. You never going to get no ratings. If you went overseas, you still wasn't going to get no ratings." But you was in there; you had to go along with the program. If we had of went along with the program, I guess everything was all right. I don't know what would have happened.
- Allen: Well, like on things like the ratings, was there anything that could be done about that, like, was there any way you could—have a grievance or—
- Meeks: Yeah, you had to go through your captains and stuff like that and if they like you, they give you a rating; see? If they didn't like you—forget it. And I never got no ratings. I stayed—I wound up as a seaman second class.
- Allen: So when you—after it was all over and you got out, you stayed here in Los Angeles?
- Meeks: Yeah, yeah, stayed right here.

- Allen: Did you go back to work at the shipyard or— what kind of work did you get into?
- Meeks: No, I went back to the shipyard and they didn't—wouldn't hire me. They said I had been gone for over two years, and they say that I wasn't qualified to be a welder because I hadn't did it in over two years. I even went down to the Navy shipyard— took my papers and everything. That didn't cut no figure. They say, well, you still been out of welding too long and now you wouldn't be a qualified welder. I say I still can weld. They say, "It's not important." So I just got different jobs from time to time—worked at the foundry, worked at a dress shop, worked in private homes and worked construction work. And then I went to work for the county, and I worked there for about twelve years. I got hurt and now they retired me. And after that— after I got well— I started doing security work. And recently I gave that up and then I went to work for the Housing Authority in the security division in the Housing Authority. But— I made it, you know. Work here and there, so I kept my family going.
- Allen: Well, that's an important thing.
- Meeks: Yeah, kept my family going. We did all right. I still kept it down—I didn't talk about it—I just kept it inside.
- Allen: Do you still feel bitter about—well, how do you feel about it now?
- Meeks: Oh, I don't have no thoughts about it. I just figure we got to roll— I just figure now the world should a knowed. Somebody should a had us— what happened to the forty-nine Port Chicago, I feel like it should have been brought out. The world needs to know what happened to— see, since none of them really know what happened, I thought it should have been exposed. Expose the Navy, and somebody really brought it out to ask what happened to them—
- Allen: Has anybody ever come around to ask you about it?
- Meeks: No, nobody never know. Nobody never know about any of this. Nobody never know that I was in there—they know I was in the service, in the navy, but they never ask about that. I guess a lot of people don't know about it, maybe because they don't ask about it. I didn't talk about it, my wife didn't talk about it—because we didn't want nobody to get the wrong impression—
- Allen: Right. Sure.

- Meeks: —on account of the kids. But then my daughter know about it—because we told her. She’s the only one, and we told her. We was talking about it, and we told her. But she the only one.
- Allen: And you haven’t seen any of the other men then?
- Meeks: No, I haven’t. What that guy’s name, what his name, the, oh, darn, I’d sure like to get a list of their names. I could get one of them procedures if I write to the Navy.
- Allen: Yeah. I’ve got—I think I’ve got—I don’t have it with me, but I’ve got a list of the names and I could send that to you. But there was one of the men who came for a visit that you saw, but that’s about it then.
- Meeks: Yeah, [Cy] Sheppard did but I didn’t see them because Sheppard—Sheppard and I had talked about going to Jamaica. He had talked to me about when I get out. He said, “why don’t you come on and go to Jamaica? And we go to Jamaica and live.” And he say, “Maybe you might like it better.” And I had thought about going to Jamaica when I got out, but then—I don’t know—you lose track—they got shipped out and I stayed here. So—that was the last I saw of any of them except for the one guy I was talking about. Yeah, he had been—had been in Japan and come back on the ship—
- Allen: So this is just shortly after—this was in 1940—what? About 1946, then, you saw him?
- Meeks: Yeah, it was about ’46—yeah, it was about ’46, ’47—
- Allen: Yeah, and then—so you had—
- Meeks: —because I got out in ’46 myself—I got out March thirteenth in ’46. So I haven’t seen or heard of none of them. I don’t know where they at. And I don’t even know their names. I’d have to, you know, you’d have to see their names to kind of go back and recognize—
- Allen: Well, they all got scattered, you know. They got broken up into groups of about three or four and shipped to different places in the Pacific. It was deliberate—I mean the Navy didn’t want anybody to see each other after that or—
- Meeks: Right, right. I know they done—see they—
- Allen: They really got scattered—

- Meeks: What they did— they shanghaied them, I know they did. They shanghaied them out and split them up. That’s—you know—so that they wouldn’t be in a group, I guess, so they could talk about it.
- Allen: Right.
- Meeks: But they was—I don’t know—they was afraid of us. For one thing— they was afraid that we might really do something, but there was nothing we could do because they had the advantage—the upper hand. Sometimes you get bitter about things, but as you get older, you forget about it. But I was staying bitter for a long time. I tell you—it was something to think about. When I first come out, I was real bitter. I was real young then but now, as the years go by—shoot, I’m sixty years old now, going on sixty-one— that’s a long time. Well, I want to look that guy up down there, the one you was talking about—
- Allen: Yeah, let me give you his address because he—he remembered you and I told him that, you know, I was going to try to visit you. He said that if I saw you, that he’d like it if you could stop by.
- Meeks: So I thought you weren’t going to work no more of that overtime.
- Unidentified: You know, well, I had told them I’d work just a couple weeks ago. I saw {inaudible} on the way over here. He said he’s going to stop by here today; he wants to go play golf up there in {inaudible} Hills. This week he said he’s going to be off Tuesday and Wednesday and then next week he going to be off Monday and Tuesday.
- Meeks: When you want to go?
- Unidentified: Whenever is convenient for you. I told him to stop by to talk to you’ he gave me his number.
- Meeks: Well, he let me know when he want to go. I can’t go this Monday, because see we got company in here from Denver—coming in from Denver—
- Unidentified: Well, he’s not going to be off this week until Tuesday and Wednesday anyway, so maybe we can get up there Tuesday.
- Meeks: Well, do you have to go? Because see now, next week, we can go— one guy’s taking his vacation—{inaudible}—worked on another ship {inaudible}—
- Allen: This was at San Pedro?

Meeks: —but they treated us pretty nice at San Pedro. Yeah, they was not hard on the guys. Well, there was nothing you could do but go out on work details. I didn't because I had that broken arm and so I didn't have to go. I worked over there in the officers' mess and that was that. Worked back there in the kitchen and didn't have to do a whole lot of work and things like that. So we just sit around and play cards and stuff like that.

Allen: You men stuck together pretty—

Meeks: Yeah—

Allen: —there was real group spirit.

Meeks: Yeah, there was a real group spirit. But then everybody stayed clear of us. I don't know why they was afraid of us. I don't know, they figured we might fight them or something. I don't know— I guess they figured we was a pretty rough bunch, since they call us the "Forty-Nine Port Chicago"? But actually, we weren't violent or nothing like that. Well, time I'm going to go out here to talk to him a little bit before he gets—

Allen: When they pulled them off the boxcar?

Meeks: Okay, well thank you.

[End of Interview]