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George Miller

Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
Javier Arbona  
in 2010

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George Miller

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01-00:00:14

Arbona: Congressman Miller, I believe you were born a year after the Port Chicago explosion. And so my first question was how did you come to learn about Port Chicago and the explosion and if you have a recollection of that.

01-00:00:37

Miller: The first time I ever heard about it was I think when I was in junior high school, in Martinez, my shop teacher, was talking about an explosion that took place—he probably said Port Chicago. I don't remember—that had, he said, blew out some of the windows in town and houses and I think he said in our school, at the junior high school, which was sort of up on a hill. There had been an explosion many miles away that had done that. I don't know in what context that was being raised. But anyway, that's the first time I ever heard about it. And I thought, "Hmm." But no, never any discussion about anything that happened prior to that. I think the publicity around Robert Allen's book and his interviews and discussions. We started looking into it in more detail.

01-00:01:34

Arbona: So it sounds like for several almost decades you didn't really—

01-00:01:38

Miller: Yes. From eighth grade until Congress there was no further discussion of it.

1-00:01:43

Arbona: Of it. And so did you then start to meet with any of the survivors at all or did you contact Professor Allen?

01-00:01:55

Miller: No, no. We just started looking at it. John Lawrence, who was my staff director at that time, was a historian and he became very interested in it. As we talked to Professor Allen and others, it became pretty clear that there was much more here and there was certainly a history that had little or no visibility at all in American history, in the traditional American history or the history of World War II. It was an asterisk. The explosion was sort of commented on quite a bit, because it was obviously the largest explosion in World War II inside the United States, but there was no other discussion about the sailors or the policies that I was aware of. Now, obviously, with the trial and with the orders to integrate the Navy, some of that went back, but pretty minimal.

01-00:03:05

Arbona: How did then the impetus or the idea from a memorial come about or was the interest first in sort of addressing the concerns of the survivors in the ~~so-so~~ called Port Chicago 50?

01-00:03:20

Miller:

Well, you did both because you tried to figure out what could you get the Congress to do. We tried to get the Navy to look at the policy and to see whether or not, in fact, it was a policy based upon race. They concluded that the trial wasn't. It was hard for me to believe that if these sailors weren't segregated in this fashion, the workforce, the trial for mutiny would have never taken place. So I couldn't see how you could have a trial for mutiny whose roots were based in a racist policy of segregating African American sailors and then say, "Well, the trial was on the level." It didn't make sense. So we tried to get the Navy to make it a mission and recognize what had taken place there. We started to look for survivors and we also thought that this ought to be marked. There ought to be some marker, historically what had taken place here. What we wanted to talk about, what had taken place, was larger than what most people wanted to talk about. But people did recognize the explosion so we figured we could leverage the awareness of the explosion, the historical nature of it. You could leverage that into the marker of the historical site and then you could fill out the history and so far that's turned out to be pretty accurate of what has happened. It's become very expansive now with a great deal of public awareness. I don't pretend that it's of great national awareness but for families and relatives and people who served there, passed through Port Chicago, we see it with the marking of the anniversaries. More and more people attend, more discussion, greater media coverage and even popular film coverage of it. So we just had to fill it out but we knew there'd be a lot of resistance in the Navy and elsewhere. Of course, we got a great deal of help from President Clinton's White House Attorney Charlie Ruff, who really helped us secure the pardon and walked us through the very detailed difficult process to justify a pardon. When you see how pardons are handed out, you wonder why we had to do so much detail for Freddie Meeks. But anyway, we did the diligence and the pardon was secured. That was big news, obviously, also. So we've just tried to continuously fill out the history of Port Chicago in the context of American race relations and American wartime history.

01-00:06:14

Arbona:

So then there's a couple of different chapters there that are really important. One is first appeal to the Navy to try to go back and look at it. Then they say no.

01-00:06:23

Miller:

They didn't think that was a good idea.

1-00:06:25

Arbona:

It goes back to legislation to then make the Navy go do that and then sort of appeals to the Clinton White House.

01-00:06:32

Miller:

Right.

01-00:06:33

Arbona:

Can you walk me through what did the Navy sort of come back with? What reasons did they use when they didn't review it the first time?

01-00:06:43

Miller:

Well, I don't really remember. But it was, "We reviewed it. We don't think it's worth reviewing." That's just a barrier that's thrown up and that's why we decided we had to go to legislation. It became pretty compelling when you had a public discussion of the segregation of the sailors. That people were aware of in a general sense, the Congress people were aware of that. The engagement of the Black Caucus in that discussion. And then the fact that these were the only people that were held for mutiny in the history of the Navy. It changed the dynamics. But we could not let the Navy just stand with a self review that said, "No, it was the way we said it was." No, it wasn't.

01-00:07:44

Arbona:

So was it difficult to then get the legislation passed?

01-00:07:54

Miller:

It was difficult to get people's attention, to think that this was important. Obviously there were those who were concerned that we were besmirching the reputation of the Navy or what have you. But it was really a question of whether or not you were going to disclose historical facts. I think people understood that there was not a denial of the episode. The record was clear from what you saw on Professor Allen's book and the court records were there and Thurgood Marshall's involvement was there in all of these things. So the question was whether the Congress would take action. People agreed to it. It took a lot of work but I don't know. There was an uneasiness. There wasn't necessarily opposition. But certainly within the military community there was some general uneasiness about this.

1-00:08:58

Arbona:

I have seen a letter to President Clinton first to try to get Bill Clinton to somehow take steps to address the conviction. That's before the pardon process. How does that work, then, to go from the first letter to then working with the White House?

01-00:09:19

Miller:

I don't remember. You'd have to talk to John or somebody. I really don't quite remember. I think that the first letter was our attempt and the second effort was really at the suggestion of Charles Ruff, the attorney for the White House out of San Francisco. I think he looked at it and said, "You guys are going about this the wrong way. What you really ought to be doing is putting in for a pardon." He got Morrison & Foerster to do it as a pro bono, to do all of the legal work that had to be done. We knew what we were dealing with. We had to dot all the Is and cross the Ts and get it up to snuff. But with his guidance and the legal help, we were able to do that and I think that's really what transitioned us. We were sort of going at it the wrong way. We weren't going

to be successful but he obviously thought we had a case of merit here and there was another way to get that kind of recognition for Freddie Meeks. But obviously whatever we did for Freddie Meeks would speak to the rest of the African American sailors who were charged with mutiny. I think at that time we had three survivors. But that was sort of understood, that he was on point for the whole episode.

01-00:10:54

Arbona:

So almost parallel to that, you're also working on getting the memorial passed at the same time. Did one thing sort of counterbalance the other? Was there any sense that if one of these doesn't work then the other one is still sort of a consolation of sorts or addresses the concerns?

01-00:11:17

Miller:

No, I don't think so. As I said earlier, obviously getting the memorial gave an opportunity for people to fill out the history. Whether we were going to be able to fill out the history or whether others, as the memorial became public, would fill out the history and sort of both things have happened. But in Congress you just don't know what doors are going to open or when they're going to open or how long they're going to stay open. So you want to try different approaches, hope for success.

01-00:11:52

Arbona:

Now, it's always very interesting to me that a lot of these bills have ended up as part of sorter larger omnibus spending bills, sort of defense bills. So when the memorial became a unit of the park service, it went through the defense bill. Is that usually a bigger challenge or is there any opposition to putting it on there?

01-00:12:30

Miller:

The answer is yes and no. Sometimes it's a bigger challenge, sometimes it isn't. We had a lot of cooperation. All these metaphors. But there are only so many trains that are going to leave the station. Some bills you know that no matter what they're going to be signed into law. If you can get into that bill, you're going to become law. Other bills, you can get them passed in the Senate, you can get them passed in the House, back and forth, but they may never quite make it to get to the President's desk. The defense bills are going to get there. So we hitched a ride.

1-00:13:15

Arbona:

Who have been some of your allies outside of Congress to work on these various initiatives?

01-00:13:25

Miller:

We've had the support of a lot of people. Not a lot of people, but Rod Wright in the state legislature was very helpful. A young woman, her name's escaping me, from the state legislature, a staff person there, very helpful. Obviously Professor Allen was helpful. Some of the Bay Area media people took that

effort. There was a hardy band of people and certainly Freddie Meeks willingness to come forward. This was a subject which was not really discussed. As we've learned from families since then, this was not discussed in families. This was part of their father's, or their grandfather's, or their husband's history that was not openly discussed, as he told us. I had an opportunity to go down and meet with him in Los Angeles. He was afraid that he would get fired from his job, he was working for L.A. County, if they knew that he was dishonorably discharged, or had a notation, however it went down for the various sailors. So to step forward, even at this advanced age. In fact, the reaction of his grandchildren and others was just the opposite. They were quite proud. He stood up for his rights at that time. So there wasn't a lot of places to go in terms of people familiar with or an in-depth understanding, but there was sort of a hardy band of people that thought this deserves more attention.

01-00:15:08

Arbona:

Now, I remember that there was a memorial, sort of a Naval armed guard memorial that was placed at the site of the explosion. Is that correct?

01-00:15:21

Miller:

I think that's right. Yes, yes.

01-00:15:23

Arbona:

Late eighties. Did you ever visit that one? Was there a ceremony there?

01-00:15:28

Miller:

I don't remember. I don't think so. I don't think so. But I don't remember whether that—it's very difficult to have access to the facility. It's obviously better today with the cooperation with the Army and the Parks Service. That's been very helpful. So you think if they put something out there who the hell would ever see it in that time.

1-00:16:05

Arbona:

So what needs to be done? What do you think needs to be done in order to kind of guarantee access?

01-00:16:12

Miller:

I think we have essentially guaranteed access. We don't have unlimited access, we don't have all the time access, but there will be the redevelopment of the remainder of the base. About half of it's being turned over to the City of Concord now. We're working with East Bay Parks, with the National Park Service, with the city to develop that. We'd like to develop a visitor's center. We'd like to maintain the chapel. So that northern part of the Naval Weapons Station property will be developed. A lot of it will have public access and certainly we want this included in that part of it. There's some other historical sites that I think you'd probably want to keep, although they obviously razed the town of Port Chicago in trying to get rid of the war protesters during the Vietnam War, which was a tragedy. Another part of a stupid policy.

01-00:17:17

Arbona:

Okay. So that raises a couple of interesting questions to me, because that's also something I've been looking at as part of my research for a long time. Like what happened to the town. And I actually had never heard the reason being given that it was because of protestors. It had always sort of—

01-00:17:41

Miller:

Oh, they had—

01-00:17:42

Arbona:

—been in my head. I was suspicious of it but—

01-00:17:44

Miller:

Well, I'm sure there's a dozen official reasons in terms of security of moving munitions, if there was another explosion. But they didn't think about that until Vietnam. No. They clearly wanted to secure the perimeters of the base. They didn't want people driving through the base at that time. You can make an argument about driving down on the waterfront, as the old road used to be. The justification for leveling the town was pretty weak but powerful in the Congressional sense. In the Pentagon's mind, they thought they were going to take care of a problem. It didn't do that, but the town was gone.

1-00:18:34

Arbona:

There's a long legacy of politicians that have—for a long time I think it was John Baldwin and Jerome Waldie that fought for the town pretty actively and vociferously in Congress and trying all avenues. Is there anything else you'd like to see in the future when the base closes that can address that history somehow.

01-00:19:02

Miller:

Well, I think it will be addressed eventually. If and when there's greater access, there will be more interest. When you go down and meet with visitors, they're quite surprised that there was a town there. You have to look pretty hard to find it today. So I think it'll all happen. But because of the lack of access, it's hard to get continuity. I think the Park Service has been great but they recognize they have to set their priorities, too, and they deal with sites where millions of people come, and thousands and thousands of people come, and here's a site that's sort of fenced off for the most part and you can only put so many resources into it. But I think as they continue to develop the stories of the home front and Rosie the Riveter, Port Chicago or Great Lakes or Dearborn, these various sites, that that'll all about. It'll come about. The marker's there. The memorial's there. The status is there. So I think it continues to grow and we see that growing. Hopefully somebody will get around to it before all of the previous residents of the town are no longer alive.

01-00:20:30

Arbona:

Yes, they're getting up there.

01-00:20:32

Miller: Yes, many of them are. Sure.

01-00:20:36

Arbona: Do you anticipate that the end of this war right now would be sort of the turning point when that base would—

01-00:20:44

Miller: I don't think there's any connection. This is a project. It's a project that has a limited number of people who are familiar with and interested enough to continue to pursue it. But we were just down at the dedication and I was really quite pleasantly surprised at the number of people who came and the distances from which people came. And really, as I am almost every time that I participate in one of the ceremonies. Families, great-grandchildren, grandchildren who hear about it. "Gee, we heard about that at the dinner table," or some part of their life who come and sort of make the pilgrimage to see where their grandfather, great-grandfather, uncle, whatever the relationship is, worked.

1-00:21:38

Arbona: This site is also a place that has been sort of contentious also because of the return of spent nuclear material that gets offloaded there now. Can you talk about that at all? Is that something that—

01-00:22:00

Miller: Oh, it was contentious in anticipation. In fact, it's a nonevent. The few people who were concerned about the spent fuel rods, I don't even know to what extent the shipments have taken place. Several have. It's still the property of the government. I think they drew the short straws in the office to go see the first load go through and it was essentially a nonevent. Whatever shipments have taken place have no matter to most people. They're just big heavy casks of spent rods.

01-00:22:50

Arbona: Well, let me just take a look here how we're doing on time. We probably have time maybe for about one or two more questions. And, actually, I think we've covered a lot of what was on the outline. Yes, I think we're kind of getting close to what you have allotted for time. I think I'll sort of ask you to talk more broadly about what Port Chicago has meant. You can even reflect upon how things have changed in the United States.

01-00:23:29

Miller: Well, I think what you see developing is you started out with an event, with the explosion, that became about a place and the place became about racial history in this country. And it's much more an historical marker of the courage of these black sailors, of the President of the United States in wartime to understand the racial segregation that was there, and of President Clinton to issue a pardon to a person who had been formally charged with mutiny. And I

think that this effort that I've gone through, and joined in by members of Congress and others, is sort of, to me, always sort of a remarkable part of America and that is the effort that goes in to exploring and making public the things that we did that were wrong. Clearly these black sailors, like African Americans in the Army and the Air Force and everywhere else, joined up to defend their country. When they went to go participate, they found a segregated country even in wartime, in the defense of that country, in most instances. So Port Chicago, to me, is sort of the opening of the doors, another door, really, because there's a story of the famous groups. It's the 442s. Japanese Americans, the Tuskegee airmen. Those were stories of great courage in kind of ironic positions that minorities were put in during the war. They were off fighting, the 442s, and their relatives are in internment camps. Very strange. People go to fight for the United States of America and it's not united with respect to their participation because of their race. So it's a remarkable story and Port Chicago was a way to sort of pull back the curtains on some of this. But it was done before that by Thurgood Marshall. It was done before that by President Truman and others. So it's exciting to participate in it and to have a chance to sit and talk with—I think they were sort of an alumni of the Great Lakes Training Center. African American sailors came to my office and we spent a couple of hours and they were just telling me stories. But the excitement and the pride that they had and that this was going to become public, because they view what happened in Port Chicago part of what happened to them elsewhere in the Navy at the same time. They were banned from serving on certain ships and certain jobs and responsibilities and all of those things that happened to them simply because they were African American, not because it was a question of competency, skill, courage or talent or anything else. It was just race.

At the dedication I tried to make the point that I was involved in securing a medal of honor for an African American soldier in World War II who, it turned out, was in fact recommended for a medal of honor but when the paperwork was all completed—he was recommended by his white commander—he was killed in covering the retreat of the rest of the soldiers and the tank. I believe he was in a tank group. He held the enemy at bay while they were able to retreat and he was killed. That paperwork was put away because he was African American. When we did that investigation, we came across several other African Americans who were recommended for the Medal of Honor, our highest honor in this country, but were denied because they were African American. To his credit, President Clinton reengaged that process and ended up awarding the Medal of Honor—all of those recipients had died by then—to their families. It was really something to be in the White House and to see those families, the grandchildren—he told them they could bring all the relatives and they did. To see them being able to talk to the President of the United States and to participate in a very formal ceremony—it was really quite emotional and very formal and rigid—on behalf of, in a

couple of cases, their husbands or their brothers, and then in other cases clearly their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

So, to me, that's all a continuum. That was the racial policy with respect to the military and Port Chicago is one part of that. But so is the early temporary segregation and working out the labor policies down at Kaiser Shipyards and on the shipyards on the Bay Area. Rosie the Riveter. She was in the integration of women. So I represent an area where a lot of this history took place and where the family members were involved in that or neighbors or relatives. So I think that's probably the attractiveness of Port Chicago to me, is that it helped make public that episode.

01-00:29:35

Arbona: Can I ask a wrap-up question?

01-00:29:36

Miller: No, we're fine. Quickly.

1-00:29:38

Arbona: Great.

01-00:29:40

Miller: Your question will be shorter than my answer.

01-00:29:42

Arbona: Well, you've also been known as being a labor advocate. I've even seen hearings in Berkeley about sort of the post-docs contract and everything.

01-00:29:55

Miller: Yes, the post-docs. Kicked the university's ass on that one.

01-00:29:59

Arbona: I think they came around to signing a contract, right?

01-00:30:02

Miller: That's what I hear. I haven't seen anything but that's very exciting.

1-00:30:04

Arbona: My post-doc colleagues—

01-00:30:07

Miller: They were great.

01-00:30:09

Arbona: Is Port Chicago a labor story, as well? Have you sort of thought about it as a labor issue?

01-00:30:18

Miller: It's so heavily overlaid with the military aspect of it that it's hard to think of it as a labor story except that we know the kind of jobs that African Americans

were getting at that point in American history. My father was involved in labor relations at the shipyards in Richmond. Clearly there was real problems in the shipyards and that's what his job was, to sort out the problems with labor relations and gender relations and racial relations and it all sort of got mixed up there. This was a community that was instantaneously integrated and a workforce, and they both happened at the same time and they essentially happened overnight because of the war. It was a struggle but in a different setting there would be more of the labor story to Port Chicago. But how they were treated and the insistence of what they do and not do, I think you could find examples of that in the industrial side of the home front war effort. But they were enlisted sailors so they didn't have quite the negotiating room or the chance to have those discussions. So I think it's a little different than that.

01-00:31:49

Arbona:

So your labor consciousness has been shaped in other ways, by other events?

01-00:31:51

Miller:

Yes. You see the same actions, the ordering of people to go back to work, the refusal to tell them whether it's safe or not, the refusal to provide them safety equipment or better gloves that they wanted or another way of loading the explosives onto the ship. You see those in workplaces today, very modern workplaces. We saw that in the British Petroleum Texas City fire, the same kinds of attitudes about management or the officers versus the enlisted, however you want to play that out. But, again, there's such a heavy military overplay on that. There's already a diminishment of your rights, the fact that you're in the military. So it's not a perfect equation to what was going on in the rest of the Bay Area at that time with the workforce on the home front.

1-00:32:47

Arbona:

Okay. Why don't we leave it there because it looks like you're getting called off to another appointment.

01-00:32:55

Miller:

We're going to see a child nutrition site.

01-00:32:56

Arbona:

I appreciate it. I think we're hoping that you can do this again for the Bancroft and maybe someday do a more extensive one about more of like your entire legislative history.

01-00:33:07

Miller:

Ah, hell, you've heard it all.

01-00:33:10

Arbona:

No, I don't think so. Great.

01-00:33:11

Miller:

Thank you very much. Thank you—

1-00:33:15

Arbona: Thank you.

01-00:33:14

Miller: —for your interest and your time.

01-00:33:17

Arbona: This was a pleasure.

[End of Interview]