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Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Percy Robinson: Port Chicago Oral History Project

Interviews conducted and donated by
Robert Allen
in 1978

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Percy Robinson served as a Navy seaman at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine during World War II. Following the explosion at the base, he became involved in a strike along with other black sailors, after it became clear that the servicemen were expected to return to the work of loading ships after being injured. In his interview with Robert Allen, Robinson recounts details from his time at Port Chicago, discussing the general conditions, discrimination, and interrogation procedures that he and other black sailors experienced.

Interview 1: May 20, 1978

Allen: Why don't we just start right at the beginning—could you tell me a little bit about how you came to get into the service?

Robinson: Well, I got drafted. I was in high school, going to Dusable High School in Chicago and I was in the last year, senior. I was 18. My 18th birthday was in December, so I got drafted in June, went in July.

Allen: What year would that have been?

Robinson: '43. This was where I first ran into discrimination that... well, I've run into discrimination before, but you didn't really call it discrimination. You just call it "I wasn't supposed to go there," one of those kinds of deals. {inaudible} But when I went to Camp Berry in the Great Lakes—when we went there, well, obviously all the blacks were together and all the whites were together. This is normal, because you associate high school and stuff like this with the grouping. When we went to eat, they had a big white house out there. We went to eat for lunch, there was two lines. Obviously you stood in this line because all of your friends was in this line. So you look around there, there's another line over there that's all white. They were going upstairs to eat on the main floor. All the blacks were going downstairs. This was the first time it dawned on me now that these people were discriminating against me. After all, they were, you know, 18 year olds. I didn't know what that was about. My mother's from the South, well she told me how prejudiced people are and they race riots in Chicago stuff like this. But once you stay in the Black Belt, see, you never had to go out of the Black Belt in Chicago; you're not affected by it as much of it. That was my first experience of racial prejudice at the Navy. On the other hand, this was the first time that the Navy let [black] seaman in the Navy see. This kind of balanced things out a little bit so it didn't bother you too much.

Allen: So you were in training then—you joined 1943. You went to Boot Camp at—

Robinson: Camp Robert Small.

Allen: At Camp Robert Small in the Great Lakes. How long was that?

Robinson: Well, it's supposed to be for three months; we got out in September, I think. July, August, September. After we got out of boot training, we went home for a week. Then we go back. We went back to another camp, I think. One kind of camp you go there you wait to get shipped out. That's when we went to Port Chicago from there.

Allen: So you went directly to... did you have a leave after—?

Robinson: We had a leave after boot camp. Then we came back and we went to another one of those camps up there. They only had four to five camps up there; Camp Robert Small was one of them. But we went to another camp, I forget the name of it. That was just waiting to be shipped out, receiving station they call it.

Allen: What was the training like at Camp Small?

Robinson: Oh ,the training was nice—oh, well, nice in the sense that they taught you how to march, how to keep clean. That was one thing that got to me, was cleanliness. You could eat off the floors. If your clothes were dirty,—if you didn't change your clothes every day, or twice a day, underwear and suits—, you got penalized for it. They was really clean, they taught you cleanliness. You ate three squares a day, which we never did before, at least I never did. Most of us never did. A lot of exercising, a lot of drilling. A lot of sports. Work details—in the sense they were penalized. Work details around the barracks where you kept clean, swept the floors, waxed the floors, washed the clothes. You learned to wash your clothes by hand. Keep your bed clean, yourself clean. Shave. Most of us didn't know how to shave. You learned to shave there, because you have to shave every day whether you need it or not. You got bumps and stuff like this. They taught you how to swim if you didn't know how to swim, you had to learn how to swim. You learn how to row boats. A lot of sports: football, baseball, basketball. Wasn't no football, but a lot of marching.

Allen: Was there any kind of specialized training of any sort with equipment or weapons, or—?

Robinson: Well, nothing special. We were—like I said, we had eight hours on the rifle range with a .22. That's the extent of the rifle range. Yeah, boot training there were no skills, the only thing was mostly marching, close drill marching, it was competition, competitive with most everything else. Competition in marching, competition in keeping your barracks clean. What outfit was the cleanest. Whoever obeyed the orders more. Disobeyed orders, like we didn't get up on time or go to bed on time, things you didn't do. A lot of guys would talk back and they got punished for that... and if you fight, obviously you got punished for it.

Allen: What rating did you have when you finished?

Robinson: Well in the Navy, you start off as apprentice seaman. And when you finished, you're third-class seaman—when you finish boot. That's like private first in the Army.

Allen: So then, from there you got shipped out to Port Chicago. Which would have been about September 1943. What was it like in Port Chicago, when you arrived?

Robinson: Oh we got there in Port Chicago I think it was only the three companies there. Our group made they called it the base company, something like that... no,

Division Four. There was three divisions there before. There were only three buildings in the whole place. Three barracks and a chow hall and an administration building. No, there was two barracks, because there was four divisions. There was Division First Floor, Second Floor... Chow Hall, and Administration Building. Big open place, and a dock, and some ammunition storage bins down there. That's about all that was there.

Allen: What was the work itself like?

Robinson: Work was.... it was eight hours a day. What it was whenever a ship was to be loaded, you come into the dock, and then they had to cruise around and tie up the ship. Then you make the ship ready to be loaded—take off the hatch covers, unlatch the winches, and get them in working conditions. Most of the time the ship was already clean—well, a lot of times they had to have carpenters. Some people were carpenter mates. They would go around a lay frames in the bottom of the ship so that they could load the ammunition on it. You couldn't load it just against the bare walls you'd have to have a framework to load it in. And once you got it loaded, they framed it in, sealed it up with wood, so that it wouldn't move. That's the carpenter mate's job.

Allen: Were black guys carpenter mates?

Robinson: Yeah.

Allen: There were whites on the base, right. There were the officers and were there other whites on the base?

Robinson: There might have been some chiefs. All the officers, like the chief petty officers, were all white; lieutenants and stuff like this. The other officers down below the chiefs, like {Bosun's} mates, first class, and stuff like that they were black. You also had a Marine detachment there for guards. They didn't stay with us, they weren't in the same area. They stayed someplace—I don't know where they stayed at, but they stayed someplace else. These men, they weren't integrated.

Allen: Yeah, the Marines were white, right?

Robinson: Marines was white. All the officers from the chief up were white. Then they had some white petty officers which worked in the administration building. Worked in the dispensary something like that, medics and stuff like this. But when you got down on the ship there, we only had lieutenants, junior grade lieutenants working over groups down there. Each hold, seem like most ships have four holds in them. So they divided division up into groups and we worked on these holds and the groups were called one, two, three, four. Then they had a group that worked in the hold; half the group worked out the hold, on the docks. So this was "group one." Because the guys in "group one" would send the material from the dock to the guys in the hold in the ship. This went all the way down the ship line.

- Allen: What kind of training did you have for the work? once you got there?
- Robinson: None. Hell. They showed us how to work into it. You went down there to work with crews that were already there. Like I said whenever we got down there, there were three other divisions there and you worked alongside them they showed you how to do it. It was just hard, common labor. The only skill part of the job was the winch operators. They had to train theirs. But when you worked in the hold, you had to be able to lift ninety-eight pounds. There was a projectile, I'll never forget that, three-inch fifty eight... fifty six; three-inch diamond, they called it. And it weighed ninety-eight pounds. I think that was the lightest thing you had to lift. So you had to be able to lift 100 pounds to work in there. That was one of the requirements, and if they found out you couldn't lift 100 pounds then they took you out. Because guys coming down with hernias or you'd drop it on somebody. That's what they're worried about it. You can drop it on the ground, it wouldn't hurt none, you know, within reason. But they didn't want you to drop the stuff on other people. Because you drop 100 pounds on somebody else—well, they had chains. Like they drop the ammunition in the middle, somebody pick it up and give it to guy in chains, pass it down. If one guy couldn't hold it obviously the chain wouldn't work see, so he wouldn't work in the hold.
- Allen: What kind of safety precautions did they have there?
- Robinson: No smoking. Well, there wasn't anything fancy. The work comes first. Now, if the winch driver was putting a load in the hold first, you couldn't go down, you couldn't descend the ladders. And if you would descend the ladder, the winch driver couldn't put the material in the hold. That's the way it was supposed to be. Most of the time it worked like that. Unless the guy was halfway down, you jumped off the ladder and started to come up, one said he couldn't stop. Those things like that, but that was the extent of the safety. They would shore up the ammunition as soon as they got one area packed. Another thing about detonators, they never put detonators below the deck of the ship, they always put them above with the mast of the ship. That was for the ship's safety, I guess.
- Allen: So the bombs themselves didn't have detonators in them?
- Robinson: No, they wasn't loaded. If you had detonators, you'd stack them up between the mast of the ship, they'll be above board.
- Allen: The idea was then you start at the bottom of the hold, and then with the wooden frames you just build up from the bottom of the hold all the way up, loading the ammunition and—.
- Robinson: That's right. And after the first couple of days, you'd be working on top of ammunition on top of ammunitions. Some of the ships were three to four stories deep; so you go way down to the bottom and start coming up.

- Allen: Incredible. How long would it take to load the ship?
- Robinson: Sometimes like a week, maybe on three hour shifts. Now you work a three hour shift and if you had the ammunition when you need it, it was already there. It would take about a week on an average ship. Do I have the ins and outs? No I guess I don't. See, like this is about a week between ships. [shows image to Allen]. And at that time we only had a facility to load two ships and I only worked on one at a time. So this means that I worked on this one about a week, yeah. Then sometimes if they were waiting for certain type of ammunition that didn't show up then you just let it sit there, but usually a week. What's so fascinating about it when they came, when the ship came into the dock well for us city people, standing out there looking at the ship way out there about three stories up. When it left you could stand at the dock and look down at the ship. You could spit over the ship and see it was so loaded with that garbage.
- Allen: What was the pace of work?
- Robinson: Oh, it was as fast as you can go. It was a challenge.
- Allen: Challenge?
- Robinson: Yeah, what happens... It was a psychological situation where nobody really had anything to gain by working hard, see, because the leader you had was a third class bosun's mate. So that's like a sergeant, like a buck sergeant. So that was only two grades between you and him. See, I was seaman second class, only two more to go to get to his grade, so there wasn't any incentive to work hard there. But there was some kind of way they got rivalry between the groups and the divisions. For some reason, each group wanted to be the top loading group. All of a sudden, here we are, you know, we're working down here and I'm rivaling against group number two to load more ammunition than them. Never think about why. Why the hell am I here rivaling against you for? For what reason? I guess the patriotic thing. [Ernest] Delucchi, the Lieutenant, he kind of built up a patriotic feeling some kind of way that the boys needed this. They couldn't exist without it, you know? It was important you got the ship out on time. The only way to get the ship out on time is that ammunition got to be loaded. Nobody's going to load it but us. We are the only ones. It gave you kind of an important-type deal. But when you look in the paper you find that there must have been a thousand of them ammunition loaders around. For a while, you felt like you were the only one loading the ship for the seas. But anyway they got you psyched up. Like a coach get a football team psyched up. Like you've lost nine games you've got to beat a team, see. What the hell I'd got to beat this team for? But you're doing it you know?
- Allen: The officer would do this then? How would they do it, do you remember anything off hand?

Robinson: Well, like I told you, they would say that we are going to make an invasion or our country's going to make this invasion someplace. We need this ammunition for this type of battle wagon for this invasion or for something like this, for some purpose. They give you a purpose. Everything was top secret so you couldn't pin it down. To speak of an invasion coming up, what the hell, invasions coming up every day. So it was one of those things. Anyway, they would talk to you. Let me see if I could be specific about how they did it... I don't know. It got down to where it was a personal thing between the groups. We used to brag about how many box cars we load against the next group. I think they used to post it on a board, if I remember right. I'm not sure which group loaded the most tonnage. That was an important thing, the word "tonnage." We used to use this. Each boxcar carried so much tonnage. And most guys—well, the guys that loaded sixteen-inch projectiles were the ones that used to win all the time, because obviously 2,000—that's one ton, see. Each item they put in the thing. And the thing about it, it was easier to handle one ton than it was to handle those little bitty things. It was less work. Because one ton item you drop one down at a time. It takes two men to roll them over to the wall. Whereas if you took a box which came in nine or twelve of three inch 56's [inaudible] in the box—well one guy would lift up twelve of those out and put them in [inaudible] with the chains. It took a lot longer to load the little ones than the big ones. And everybody used to think that wasn't fair, so we used to switch holds because of that effect. What'd we used to get for that?... Oh, we used to get flags. Oh yeah, I remember now. They had whoever was the best at loading would carry a flag on their barracks. I think that's what it was, I'm not sure but I think I remember that. Because the flag used to pass from one barracks to the other, whoever loaded that week the most tonnage. That was a contest between them. That's what it was.

Allen: What happened if a group or division, didn't come up to par, as far as what they were expected to load?

Robinson: Well, if I remember right, there was always somebody weak in the group, they'd move him out of the hold and put him on the dock. The crews on the dock for some reason seemed... well, see that was something else, a stigmatism. The guys who worked in the hold seemed to have a better status than the guys who were working for the dock. I don't know why. The ones in the hold got rated quicker than the ones on the dock for some reason.

Allen: They got rated quicker?

Robinson: Yeah, you got your promotion quicker. At least they promoted the guys faster in the hold than they did on the dock. This got to be a stigmatism between the people inside the group too.

Allen: Was there any threat of penalties if they didn't do it or slow it down?

Robinson: To be honest with you, I just can't remember that. I don't think so. I think the only time we got penalized was when you know, you break the basic rules like AWOL; you fight, gamble. You got penalized for those things. You disobeyed orders, obviously you got penalized. Bread and water was a popular punishment. I didn't remember, right now I don't, they might have been.

Allen: Was there any time when guys's division or group would deliberately slow down—if there was a problem or grievance, or something like that?

Robinson: Oh yeah, I think we had some. We got into it about promotions, I think. There was a slow down at one time for some reason. I think it was about promotions. I think they promoted one group, everybody felt they should promote one in each hold at a time. They picked one group, they promoted two to three guys in that group. If the group was a good-working group; that was the group I was in. The rest of the guys got pissed off about it, and I think they slowed down. We had a guy in our group named Meryl Wiley from Ohio State University. He was a college man, football player. That dude could work. He was a ladies man, good-looking dude, you know. Big guy. He and I got promoted same time. We were in the same group. We had a real good group though, see. Another guy from Ohio, too. Doug Williams and Bill Smith, and all those guys. We had some pretty big guys in our group. I wasn't too big, but I used to be a weight lifting prize fighter before I got in the service and while I was in the service, so I had muscles. I could work. We were a really good group, really good. That's why we got the promotions. This was within our division, now. About the other divisions, I don't know. This was in the Fourth Division. For some reason you just didn't associate with other groups. Because, one reason, some of them worked at night—but see, they had three shifts. You never did see them, you're asleep. The only time you hear from them is if you came in off of a ship or shift like we did; like if our ship left early three in the morning. We start working the graveyard shift and so on. We get in at 4:00. These guys who worked all night long, all day long, they're sleeping now. We make all this damn noise, you catch hell from them. If for example, we are on the second floor, they are on the first floor, we came in we had to walk through their barracks to go upstairs and all night long, we are taking showers and stuff and that's when the feud starts, see. Because they are on a different shift and they were still sleeping. They had to get up in the morning and go down and load that ship. We'd be waking them up. Yeah, that was some of the things that you had. Other than that, the rivalry was mostly in athletics.

Allen: How did the guys feel about the danger of the work itself?

Robinson: Well, they really didn't believe it was any danger to it. You had a sense, but you didn't. We never saw a bomb blow up, we never was on the artillery range, none of us; until just before that happened, they used to send us to gunnery school because why's they send us to gunnery school. I don't know, but they did it. But until that time you never saw a shell explode. It's like working with gas in a gas stove. Be dangerous, but you think what the hell, it don't blow up. But we had

some funny experiences that we had learned about things—like sixteen-inch projectile, that's one the battleship shoots. Well, each battleship has different color dye in the nose of the projectile. This is so that if two or three battleships shoot at a target and one of them is off, they can tell by the color of the explosion, which one is off. This dye is under pressure down at the tip of the projectile; it's pressurized. Well, if you bust the nose against a piece of—if you break the seal on it, it squirts out. And if you see a bomb sitting there—*psssst*, you see like in the movies, that's like a fuse. It looks like it's going to explode. Now that happened to us one time. This is what they should have told us about that. We should have went to school or something to learn about something like this. The first time it happened, three to four guys broke their legs trying to get out of the damn hold. If you've ever been down in a ship in the hold, they've got a ladder about this big; it's wet most of the time. It's wet, because it's dewy. We were down in the hold working and they dropped one of those things down there. You spin them around to get them in the hold and sometime lose control because they are wet, and the thing hit against the bulkhead, said *psssst*. Red stuff started coming out. Well, hell, you had ten to twelve guys trying to get out of the hold at the same time. Well, you can't do it. It's funny now, but it wasn't then. A couple of guys broke their legs trying to get out of that hold. And then people laughed at us, because we weren't familiar with the situation. And then evidently it had happened before, see. It was kind of a funny joke to some people.

- Allen: When you went to work there, you really had no idea about the structure of the bombs or—?
- Robinson: We didn't even know what it looked like. You pick up the projectile see, and you say, "well hell, where's the fuse at?" Obviously, the fuse ain't in it. But you never went to any school, ammunition school. Now lately, when the base started getting bigger they did have ordinance schools they called it, to teach people.
- Allen: This was before the explosion?
- Robinson: Yeah, well, see, before the explosion, they were getting more people. They built more barracks. The thing was growing. When we first got there, the first few months we were there, they didn't have that kind of thing. But they did have some kind of ordinance school. Then they used to send the guys to gunnery school to learn how to shoot guns on the ships—three-inch guns on the ship. Machine guns also.
- Allen: How did the guys feel about just the general conditions there, and so on? Was there many grievances, or the guys seem to find it okay? What was the general attitude?
- Robinson: The general attitude from what I got, it was great. Because you know, most of us were eighteen and just out of high school. Most of us, they came from every place but you know, come out of an area where you didn't have anything to start with;

most of the guys didn't. Now you've got a bed, now you've got a locker. Got a place to keep your clothes. You have three squares a day—which we never ate three squares a day mostly anyway. And you worked. And then you had a ball. After, you had liberty, you went to town. And this thing was a temporary thing, you know. When we first got there, we didn't have no problems. No, I couldn't remember any gripes. They must have had gripes about something... No, because they built this good recreation hall. And a bowling alley, I think. I know we had a bowling alley, two lanes.

Allen: That was the recreation hall right? That wasn't built till fairly late though right?

Robinson: Yeah, that was late. This was the end.

Allen: In fact I think in the record I found it said something about the recreation hall was built like June '44.

Robinson: Just before the blow up. [inaudible] No, I think most of our troubles were with the city of Oakland and Frisco because of their prejudice. Little town of Port Chicago wasn't prejudiced. We go down to eat and drink anyplace down there we want to. 'Cause they only had a few places to eat. Port Chicago was a pretty nice place.

Allen: Oh, yeah? It was okay, then? So you guys can go there and be served.

Robinson: Yeah, that was the first place I'd ever drank an ale. In fact I didn't even know ale existed 'till I got down there. I'm come from Chicago and I saw everything, but this—we didn't have ale. One arm bandits, you know they had them down there. The poker tables that you see in the Westerns, poker table with the green lamp over it—the green table round table, and this one dude sitting there with those things on his arm, they had them down there. It was just like the old western days. That's about the extent of that little town.

Allen: Were these places open to the black guys, or was it certain areas?

Robinson: You mean that little town?

Allen: In Port Chicago.

Robinson: Yeah, you can go there. Yeah, we went there, now you wasn't going to poker with those people, 'cause you get wiped out. But we used to play the one-arm bandits; we just went all the time I was there. One place I know we couldn't go was in Pittsburg, California. Pittsburg was restricted; well, not restricted—just that you couldn't go downtown. They didn't want you downtown. You stayed on Black Diamond Street in Pittsburg. Oakland, Frisco was a bad place. Well, I guess Chicago was the same way, but we never went downtown in Chicago, 'cept going to the movies. We never went to the nightclubs down there, or the taverns—well, I guess we did too. Chicago was prejudice in a sense... well, if you went to the

north side. Well, I don't know. But I know downtown the big hotels, they didn't want you down there in Chicago. But we went to some nightclubs down there because... they had a couple in Chicago you could go to downtown. We checked the black artists down there. In Oakland, you had certain areas you go to. What was really bad about the—Sweet's in Oakland was bad, because Count Basie be playing at Sweet's on a Sunday, but you couldn't go on a Sunday, you had to go on a Monday. 'Cause on a Sunday, the white people were there. No kidding, it was a big joke. Like the Oakland auditorium, they had dances there but they were on Monday night. Same band now, they play Sunday night. This is stuff your mother tell you about Mississippi. Now, Frisco was a little different. You could go to some of the real expensive places in Frisco.

Allen: What was the relations like between the enlisted men and the white officers?

Robinson: Well, tell you what, pretty good. Well, I won't say that. I'll take that back. My personal point of view, I had one guy stand up for me as a godfather—the executive officer, Lieutenant Elwood. That's why I become a Catholic down there. I'd been associated with the Catholic Church all my life. I used to box with the Catholic Church in Chicago, but never really was a Catholic. So when I went to the base there, I took lessons to become a Catholic. Then when you got baptized, somebody would stand up for you, that was a Catholic, so Lieutenant Elwood stood up for me. I got baptized on Christmas Eve the first year I was there—so '44, then—in Martinez, California. There was a church up there. Delucchi was our officer for the Fourth Division. I didn't like him too well. None of the guys really liked him too well, but they respected the guy.

Allen: What was he like?

Robinson: He was scared. He was always blaming the laws or the Navy for the conditions. We say, "How come we have to do this?" He say, "That's the rules." He would back up behind the rules, never make a decision without the—I guess he was only a Lieutenant, couldn't do much.

Allen: How old was he? Was he a young guy himself?

Robinson: No, he looked like he's an old guy. Like he was in his thirties. It wasn't no love between us. You didn't really like the guys, but you didn't hate them either. Because they were the bosses, they were the ones that made you work so hard. But it just seemed like once you got there, you got on liberty when you wanted to—well, when you were supposed to. If you made some bad mistakes, you really didn't get wiped out too bad. But there was no love—there was none. Like Elwood—now, see Elwood would have got me out of this court martial if I had said yeah. "You want to stay here. Let's go. Get your bags you can go, we can leave right now." But hell, you wouldn't come 'round ship with this dude. Even though he was my godfather, but you just weren't going to leave. You're young. You say, "What the hell, this is where I'm supposed to be." So you stayed. Now

some of the guys backed out that way, got out that way. Some of the guys give 'em a break, say, "Let's go."

Allen: Let's go where?

Robinson: Back to work. You know, you're in prison. The man say, "You want to leave." And he's say "Well, pick your bags up, let's go." Just like that. That was kind of tempting because it was no fun being in the stockade, with those egotistical guards. No fun at all being in stockade.

Allen: What happened the night of the explosion?

Robinson: The night of the explosion. Well, let's see; that day—that week, I'd been taken off my regular crew, see. Since my godfather was the executive officer of the base, they were trying to find a decent spot for me. They said "man, seem like you've got enough education, you'll be able to do something besides work on the docks." "Well, yeah I can maybe paint some signs." I was an artist type. "Can you drive a truck?" They tried to get me a job driving a van that drove people down there. I failed that test, I couldn't drive the van well. I didn't drive it well enough and couldn't use the air breaks well. So he said, "We'll put you on, make a winch driver outcha." I was going to winch driving school then. On the day, on the ship that exploded, I worked on that ship that morning running the winches on that ship. But I was down there on trial—you know I was learning, trying to teach me to operate the winches on the ship.

Allen: So you hadn't been trained before on the winch? You were learning on the job?

Robinson: No. Before I worked in the hold. I got off work 4:00 that day from the ship—that ship was loaded too. It was way down, it was about ready to leave. It was full. You come home and shower, and you go down to the rec hall and play some pool or something. But I didn't go to the movie that night. They usually have a movie every night. But I came back, my bed was right in front of the window. Top bunk, one of those big modern barrack, the whole wall was glass from four feet up. As soon as the lights out—taps they call it—all the lights go out. Jump up in bed, and sit there and all of a sudden everything lights up, just like that, it was about 10:20, lights go out 10:00 I think. About 10:20, 10:15 this thing went off. I was sitting in the bed see the whole window thing comes right through, while you're sitting right there in your underwear. We were on the first floor too. Then you hear stuff falling on top, see, obviously you're going to fall out of the bunk onto the floor and crawl under the bed, keep the stuff from falling on you. The guy next to me he didn't make it. Well, he didn't get out of the bed, something must have held him in there. Anyway the beam hit him in the shoulder, busted his arm off. He was the only guy that really got hurt in the area where I was. What's amazing after the thing was over, you jumped up, get your flashlight, run around, dude's saying "man, where is Joe at?" Cat said, "Joe over in the corner with Percy, man, he got wiped out." They guy looking at me, he didn't know who I am. I got hit in

the face. My face got really messed up. This is the only hole I got left. They did a pretty good job on my face, and my left arm, got holes in it, big holes in my left arm.

Allen: That was from the glass?

Robinson: Yeah, glass and wood and plaster. What's amazing though, everything was just cut—skin looking back, it was full of blood. We had these flashlights, trying to look around, trying to find people. You look in a person's face but you couldn't tell who they were.

Allen: After the explosion, you were taken, evacuated to the hospital or—?

Robinson: Yeah. I think it was Camp Stoneman. It was an army camp. North. Just before you get to Pittsburg. Camp Stoneman. What happened—we had some ambulances there, see. So all the people that needed medical treatment, take them to the area and then take them up to the hospital. Some officer told us to do that, see. That was one ambulance. Took trucks—we had some trucks—there too, taking people up. For some reason, I guess the explosion messed up the highways. Traffic was heavy. I guess what happened it blew down all the trees and stuff because the whole little town got almost wiped out. The concussion went out, there's a hill up here, like this is a hill and Port Chicago is just down like this. Well, the concussion went over the house, hit the hill and came back down the hill, so that a lot of houses were laying toward the explosion. Yeah, all the house were laying, it had pushed them over, laying like the concussion came back this way instead of from the bay side.

Allen: The barracks themselves were they pretty wiped out too?

Robinson: Yeah, but they stood. They didn't fall down. It just went right through the barracks. The rec hall fell down, though. The theater, it just collapsed. But it was closed, nobody was there.

Allen: What did you or the guys feel was the cause of the explosion?

Robinson: The guys felt that... well, from discussion, they felt that it was an accident because the crew that was bring on when we left were—they were on the night shift, so they were beginners. They were new group. And a new group of people usually have new winch operators. It's funny though, you should have older winch operators but they usually have new winch operators. You can get an accident down there. We've had some accident already down there before, but we're lucky. You know like you start up on one side you winch freezes, see, and it shouldn't but it does. Like you have old steam winches and you had two separate steam engines, one on each side. You've got two cables on one winch and you've got a motor that drives each cable. You've got to control each one. Now if one of 'em freeze, you're running the other one. Obviously like having a stiff arm, you pull

on the other one, it's not going to come up, it's going to run into the side of the ship with the ammunition, or whatever you're carrying. If you're carrying detonators at the time it does this, the rest of the garbage you can run through the side of the ship and it probably won't blow up. Usually when the ship's loaded, the last thing you load is detonators. That's the last thing you put on the ship. These ships, both of them I think—well, one of them is almost loaded, and the other one was ready to go, I guess. That's what they were loading that ship. That's what we would think. The detonators that they were loading just messed them up. Well, nobody ever said it was sabotage. But man, the docks sure was messy when you went down there to clean it up. Some of the guys went back down there and said they saw bones and stuff stuck in these woods. I didn't go back, because I stayed in the hospital all the time.

Allen: So you were at Stoneman?

Robinson: Well, at Stoneman for that one night. And then the next day, they took us up to Mare Island. That was the naval hospital.

Allen: So when did you get back with the division, then?

Robinson: Well, we went back to the division... maybe a week after that, because the rest of the guys had moved over to Mare Island—the ones that weren't hurt. So after I got out of the hospital, I was always able to walk. But got my face all worked over. I still had bandages on when I went back to work. A lot of us still had bandages when we went back to work.

Allen: What was it like then in the time between the explosion and August ninth when you were ordered back to work? You said the guys were talking amongst themselves?

Robinson: No, it wasn't—see, everybody was thinking about going home. That's the main thing. When we got back together before we had to go back to work, I think the talk was going home. We're all talking about going home. Everybody was scared, too. 'Cause you drop a box, dudes be running around. If somebody slam a door, people be jumping around like crazy. See, everybody was still nervous, you know. Just scared, I guess; the noise and stuff like that. And everybody was thinking about going home. First time they ordered us to go back to work, you know we had little jobs, tie us a ship. A ship come in, you tie lines down and go up and open the hatches up. That was about two to three hours work. That's how they conned us into getting back to work. We've got to keep you guys busy, keep you from getting bored. We've got a little job for you. So we go out and do little job first. Next couple of days, we weren't doing nothing. Go back and do another little job. Well, so finally they got us back on regular duty. Loading regular ships. Cats say, "Oh, you know, we were supposed to go home." No there ain't gonna be leaves. Can't go home. Then everybody got kind of unhappy with it. 'Cause nobody objected to going down doing the little bitty jobs, a couple of hours tie

up—make a ship ready, or either close it up after the leaves. Like the ship is all loaded, you've got to put the hatch covers back on, seal them up; you've got to close up the winches and stuff like this. This was an easy job, wasn't no hard work. You could do it with bandage, one hand not working, see. Well, if you had one hand they'd make you a hatch tender. You sit there, tell the winch driver what to do. It was a big joke, 'cause you stand there with one hand. It was stupid because there were other people there. 'Cause Mare Island Naval Shipyard was the place that they used to load ship before we got there. They had boys there working there before we got there. I don't know why they did it. Anyhow, I guess they did it to antagonize us or something like that, 'cause you know, we kept asking to go home. Well, we kept asking our petty officers about going home. So one day when we got down there, Delucchi said, "Forward, march. You're going to load this ship." "Oh no we ain't, we not gonna go." He said, "I'll give you fifteen minutes to think about it." We didn't go in fifteen minutes, so they called the SP's [shore patrol] out. We still didn't go, so we just went on back to the barracks. That's when the thing started.

Allen: Had guys considered what they were going to do when they were ordered back to loading?

Robinson: Yeah, we said. We just decided when they wouldn't let us go home, we wasn't going to work. Say we're entitled to go home, and somebody let us go home, we wasn't going to work. Say we're entitled to go home, and somebody quoted something from the books that said you go home if you got wounded.

Allen: Someone checked it in the book you said?

Robinson: Yeah, somebody quoted it from the book some place.

Allen: Blue Jacket's Manual?

Robinson: Yeah, Blue Jacket's Manual or something. But nobody really checked it. I know I didn't check it. I assumed it. If anybody asked me today, "if you get wounded what happens after that?" You go home. You go to the hospital and you go home. But whether that's true or not, I guess a lot of guys went to the hospital and went back out there and fight again. That's something you didn't about it. We felt like if we'd gone overseas and got hurt, we go home. That's a joke though. You could wake up in the morning, walk out in the morning—excuse the expression, with your shoes on your hands, gloves on your feet, and say, "I want to eat some pussy," and you go back to the States just like that, dude. No kidding. Guys will do that. They'll be back at Pearl Harbor writing a letter, we're still laughing at them. And the guys, when they want to go home, you just walk out there one day. We had a, our CO [commanding officer], he just could not stand no queers. If you pat him on the rear, he might shoot you dude. You could get away by, you could hit him with your fist and you hand, but don't pat him on the rear end. Them guys would go home. I don't know, I guess the Navy had a thing against homosexuals, queers.

And just like that [snaps] you're out. That's one way you can get out. I don't care what else you did, you could shoot people and wouldn't get out of jail—out of the Navy.

Allen: Before you were ordered back to loading ammunition, had you heard anything about what was happening with any of the other divisions—like whether they had been ordered back to loading or what had happened, or anything like that?

Robinson: No because, in our case... for some reason, our division got moved to Mare Island. A lot of them didn't. Some stayed at Port Chicago. I don't know.

Allen: How many were there in all by that time?

Robinson: I'll be darn if I know, because there's so many new peoples. Some of them stayed there, Port Chicago, to do the cleanup work and stuff like that. No, I can't remember if there was a tie between ours and theirs. I just don't remember. I don't know whether they went on strike first over there and we followed, or we went first and they followed, or whether they went on strike at all.

Allen: Did the guys think of it as a strike?

Robinson: Well, yeah. It was defiance. Well, if they don't let us go home, we ain't gonna work. It was one of those kinds of deals.

Allen: This is what the guys said amongst themselves.

Robinson: Yeah, that's what we all decided. Said "hell, okay, that's what we're going to do. They won't let us go home, no sense in working."

Allen: What did you think was going to happen?

Robinson: We thought they were going to let us go home. We had agreed that there was too many of us for them to put us in jail. Gee, that's right. It was kind of stupid, but, you know—it was that age, we were thinking that way. We were thinking, "What the hell, we don't want to go to work, we get mad, they'll let us go home." They put us in a brig, but we didn't think we'd get shot, though. We didn't think you could shoot people for this kind of stuff. We go to brig, that's better than going down there on that damn ship. What they gonna do with you in the brig? We had been to the brig before. So hell, forget it. I guess all your little grievances that come out, that built up long before it. A lot of things you didn't like before, you just didn't do anything about 'em. But now, they're all piled up now. I guess you put 'em all together. Just sit back there thinking, "Remember the time we worked so damn hard on a special ship all night 'cause sometimes there be some rain. Out there working on ships when it's raining, you'd slip and hurt yourself and get busted up. No special compensation or nothing. Just another piece of hunk of meat. You know all this stuff builds up. Like a lot of people used to get strained,

get hernias. Hernias were common. I got mine in my ears. Rather than get hernias, I got a strain that comes up through your ears; and what happens is that your eardrums go off for some reason, don't work no more. You wake up one morning, you can't hear. You're locked off. Because you strain yourself see, I wished I had a hernia instead of that. You incur a hernia, just cut it out and it goes away. But everybody had bits of argument; little things, little dissatisfactions. I guess this one way this come to a point. See, we didn't think—we thought the worst they could do is put us in the brig. And we'd get transferred to some other duty. That's usually what you do when you do something bad: they put you in the brig and they transfer you someplace else.

Allen: So that's what you expected: either you'd be able to get the leave and go home, or get transferred?

Robinson: Yeah, go to the brig to do three to four months, then get transferred someplace else. At least you get away from the ammunition. I mean you can't quit, you know. You have no choice. This is one way of getting away from it. You just got tired of it.

Allen: I guess I'm still not clear, though, on how it is the whole group was able to... There was the Fourth Division and the Eighth Division and the Second Division that all refused to go back.

Robinson: Oh you mean the tie in between the two.

Allen: Yeah, how was it?

Robinson: There must have been some kind of communication between the two some kind of way; but damn if I can remember. Because when I got out of the hospital and got to the group... that's the first thing that happened when I got back from the hospital. Everybody's talking about going home. Then we didn't go home, so we didn't go to work, so immediately there were some charges. They just moved us from Mare Island to some... where did we go then? They put us on some barges, some floating barracks someplace.

Allen: This was after—?

Robinson: Refused to work.

Allen: Okay, put you on a barge.

Robinson: Yeah, it was a floating barracks someplace they put us. And I think that was when they put all the divisions that didn't go back to work together, if I remember right. Well from my point of view, my level in the group, I wasn't a groupie or anything to squad leader. There was no communication between the Fourth Division and

the other two divisions. There might have been some else along the lines but I wasn't aware of it. If I was aware of it, I just can't remember. I just don't know...

Allen: What happened on that barge?

Robinson: We were guarded, once you were put on that barge you couldn't get off, see. They had wash rooms on there and everything else, bunks where you could sleep at but you couldn't get out because they had guards. So you was confined. Some type of confinement.

Allen: Was that barge big enough for the whole 250-some odd men?

Robinson: Yeah, but there was more than one barge though; there was three or four of them. A lot of them down there, for some reason. But I really can't picture it good. That's about the only place I've been that I can't visualize in detail, what it was. But it was barges, because there was only one guard. You couldn't get out the other side, because it was water out there.

Allen: So you was strung together.

Robinson: Yeah, strung together, yeah. Like there were more than a dock. Each barge had a guard.

Allen: Okay, so you're on the barge and then were you there for a couple or three days or so. What happens during that period on the barge? [Robinson is silent] What did the guys think was going to happen or what was—?

Robinson: Well, they were getting kind of concerned about getting the short end of the stick, because the tone had changed from going home or going from the brig. Well, we had one more hope when we saw this happened before we had this admiral come out and talk to us. We didn't know we could get shot, you know. But anyway, everybody was getting concerned about, I'm trying to figure out what happened... but I remember barges. I remember the meeting we had on grind with the admiral. After that—

Allen: Was there a meeting on the barge?

Robinson: No, it was too small to have a meeting there.

Allen: Yeah, 'cause in the testimony, there was reference—at the court martial of the fifty guys, there was reference to a meeting on the barge.

Robinson: Oh, you mean among the people.

Allen: Among the guys, yeah.

Robinson: Well, if you want to call it a meeting. It was a discussion, you was constantly sitting there all day long. Well, I guess it could have been. We discussed it in groups. It wasn't anything official. I wasn't called a meeting that I can remember... well, maybe not, maybe there was some meetings there, it depends on how you define meeting. We sit around and discussed it.

Allen: What was the general feeling?

Robinson: General feeling was that we were going to get the short end of the stick. We wouldn't get to go home. And if we wasn't going home, we wasn't going to go to work. And I guess like in all meetings, there are some people more outspoken than others. I guess they were picked out as leaders or something, or directors of the meetings. Maybe they weren't the leaders of the meeting—but to me, leaders didn't mean that. I came out of a gang-oriented situation in Chicago. That didn't mean leaders to me. What the white man call it is something else. Maybe it was "leader", but to me that wasn't a leader.

Allen: Was the general feeling amongst the guys to stick it out?

Robinson: Yeah, we were stubborn, we were stuck you know. We made a commitment. There was a few guys, a very few, wanted to change their minds but most of the people were clear: "This is the way they are going to act—hell with them, then." I guess we really didn't realize what jail or anything was like. Well we've been to the brig a couple of times but you figure—I don't know what we were figuring, but, you just mad. Just pissed off. Hell with 'em, they can't shove us around like this. So you take what you get. You know figure well, you don't care what they're going to give you. At least you didn't think you were going to get shot.

Allen: What about the mutiny charge? Did anybody expect that there would be a mutiny charge?

Robinson: Well, we didn't even know what mutiny meant. We thought mutiny was something like when you kill people and take over something. That's as far as the word mutiny meant to us. But we didn't know you could define us as being a mutiny—disobeying orders.

Allen: Was it even discussed, though?

Robinson: Well, I think Delucchi said we're going to be charged with mutiny. I think it came up with them.

Allen: Who said that?

Robinson: Delucchi.

Allen: Oh, Delucchi.

- Robinson: Yeah. Said, “you’re going to be charged with mutiny.” We say, “That’s a joke.” ‘Cause I think we’re kind of stupid. Mutiny can only happen on a ship. All this kind of smartass talk. We didn’t know what we were talking about, but it was serious and we just thought that we didn’t believe the guys. We thought the guy was full of bullshit. Can’t charge mutiny. Nobody took over a ship. That’s because we didn’t know what mutiny meant. It didn’t mean anything to us; the only time it got to a point—when that man said, “you can be shot for committing mutiny during time of war”, see, when the country’s at war—then we said, “well we’ll go back and check this.” So we checked around—how many been shot for mutiny. We didn’t have any information. Couldn’t find one or two dudes been shot. “Hell they can’t shoot us!” some guys would say that, anyways. You know to boost up your ego; whether you believe it or not is something else. But that was the sense, that they couldn’t shoot us.
- Allen: Okay, so the guys want to go home or want to get transferred... how are you going to let the officers know this? You guys talked to the officers, or—
- Robinson: Well, we talked to the petty officers.
- Allen: Petty officer, those are the black petty officers?
- Robinson: You know, Boyer. I think Small, one of the guys that stayed. Because they stayed associated with us even though they didn’t go along with the strike—at least Boyer didn’t.
- Allen: Boyer didn’t. Small did.
- Robinson: Small did, yeah. So you went through Small to Boyer, and Boyer would talk to Delucchi. Delucchi never talked to us. When he talked to us, he talked to us with the bosun mate there. And it was always a pep talk for everybody—but any kind of direct communication came down the lines.
- Allen: Was there any kind of talk of like a petition or something like that? I remember somewhere somebody mentioned a petition, or was in the mention of the trial or something like that. That a petition was circulated or something like that?
- Robinson: If they did, I didn’t have anything to do with that. I don’t remember signing anything. Or anything anybody else signing anything if there was a petition to be signed, I don’t remember that.
- Allen: So you’re on this barge. You got off the barge to go to the chow hall, but otherwise you’re on the barge the whole time.
- Robinson: Yeah, the whole time.

- Allen: Did the officers come on the barge or interrogate men, or were you basically just—?
- Robinson: We're just there. We're just held there. When we got interrogated, I think we were taken someplace else.
- Allen: That would have been after the admiral.
- Robinson: Yeah, that was after the admiral talked to us.
- Allen: So you're on the barge then they call you off, and they send you on the— wherever it was.
- Robinson: Oh we were in Shoemaker when we got interrogated by each individual officer.
- Allen: Yeah, that's right, that was at Shoemaker. So after the time on the barge, then you're called off and assembled, that's when the admiral comes down. What does he say?
- Robinson: Well, he was explaining, he gave us one last chance to go back to work. Then he went on to explain how important our job was. Give us a con job first. And then he says, "we're giving you one more chance to go back to work." He said, "Everybody that want to go back to work step forward." I think there was maybe... if I remember right, there was eight, maybe ten, out of the whole bunch that stepped out. He said, "Okay, you guys walk over this way." So they walked off. Then he got down to business. He started telling us what could happen to us if we don't change our mind. The second time he gave us a chance to change. Then he walked over and said, "Well, we can shoot all of you son of a guns." He used legal language but he said, "we'll shoot all you son of guns" —put you before the firing squad. And then he went through and he threatened. Since all the short people were in the front line—I was in the front line, so you could smell his breath as he's walking down the line. He kind of frightens you. What can you do? It's like a guy points a gun at you and says, "I'm going to shoot you" and then you're in the reaching range of him. You can't run, so you got to stand still and take it. You feel like you want to do something, but what you going to do? So, you stand still and you take the stuff. See, you're scared... so there must be something there. He can't be telling the truth. You know, you look at a white man anyway, from my point and you say, "You lying." He got a damn good reason to lie. I don't know why he's lying but he must be lying. When we were going to prison, I believe no dude would hit me with no billy club, stick either. Shit, man; better not hit me with no stick, shit, because I didn't believe it. But I found out different. But hell, I didn't believe that. But after he gave us a talk, nobody else went back to see. So I think that's when we got out our gear and we're shipped to the stockade at Shoemaker. That was a bad experience there. Them Marines up there—real out of this world.

- Allen: After this admiral talks, he says give you one last chance. Ten guys step out, so they were willing to go back to work. Then he runs this whole thing about threatening to shoot, and so on. Then what happens? How did the separation occur between the forty-four or the fifty, or whatever and the rest of the group. How did that happen at that point?
- Robinson: You mean those ten that went back to work?
- Allen: No, I mean the—
- Robinson: The one's they picked as leaders?
- Allen: Yeah.
- Robinson: That was a process. After that we went to Shoemaker. There was a stockade. I think at that point. Okay, yeah. We went there and at that point we were interrogated. That's when we received our papers for being on trial. We were interrogated before we got those papers. I think we went in, they'd take four to five at a time, a group at a time. I think after that we were held there. I can't remember exactly. If I remember now, I think we got interrogated, it was in Shoemaker when we got to the stockade up there. And then everybody was supposed to be charged with general, they'd told us, and then after—
- Allen: They told you this during the interrogation?
- Robinson: Yeah, everybody would get a general court martial, a bad conduct discharge, after you go to prison.
- Allen: So this is when you're called up individually. This what they tell you.
- Robinson: Yeah to explain what happened. And who'd you talk to, who was the leaders. I remember this as good too 'cause I remember they say, "Who was the leader?" I'd say "There was no leader!" Then five minutes later they say, "Who'd you talk to?" I say I talked to this guy. "So who told you about the other divisions?" I say I heard it from this. Then after writing it down, I'd say I'm not gonna put these guys name out like this— You got conned into, well I don't about getting conned. It was the way you thought, but if you were trying you defend against an action which you didn't believe existed, then you did a poor job of it. If I believed that there were leaders then obviously, you wouldn't give their names. You wouldn't name the leaders anyways because you wanted to protect them. They separated them from the rest of us. I can't remember whether they were in the stockade with us or whether this happened before or not. Because I can't remember but one of the guys that was convicted leaders. I remember one 'cause he was from Chicago.
- Allen: Who's that?

- Robinson: I went to school with the dude too, I can't remember his name.
- Allen: Tell you what, I got the list here. Maybe we can look at the list.
- Robinson: I saw him when I got back to Chicago. That's about the only one I knew who was in the group.
- Allen: This is a list of guys who were convicted on general and the towns too. Chicago: Birage, David, Ellis.
- Robinson: Grimes, Grimes, wait a minute. I know Harry Grimes, but he ain't from Chicago. No.
- Allen: Some more on the other page: Miller.
- Robinson: I can't pick this guy.
- Allen: It wasn't Gray, though, 'cause he signed your book there, Charles Gray. He's from Chicago.
- Robinson: I can't tie him with that name, it might be, well I'm not sure yet.
- Allen: He's one of the guys in the fifty that you knew, then.
- Robinson: One of em's from Chicago. I saw him in Chicago after he got out. Okay, so there ain't but two or three of 'em in there. One of them must have been him. I went to school with the guy. I know him. I say I know him, but I don't remember his name. I just can't remember; shows you how bad my memory is. There is a blank area there between the transition between there and—
- Allen: Yeah, see, 'cause in the trial testimony when the admiral talks he makes his threats and so on; and then the division leaders Delucchi, the lieutenants order the guys to fall out in two groups: those who are going back, those who are not. There's an indication there; it's at that point that they began to make—
- Robinson: The fifty, huh?
- Allen: Well it wasn't fifty, it was only forty-four. But then some other guys get thrown in later on. Anyhow, the forty-four or fifty get separated out. They are not with the rest of guys when you all wind up at Shoemaker.
- Robinson: Now that you mention it, I'm trying to remember if I ever really go back to work or not. No, I can't remember. Maybe I did; but I'm not sure I did. Just you mention, seem like it's familiar. They did give us a second chance to go back to work. Be honest with you, I don't know whether I did or not. Well I know, I didn't get a general. I got a summary, but I didn't get a general.

- Allen: Actually, they didn't put it in terms of going back to work either. If I remember right, what they said was all men willing to obey all orders fall out over here. All men not willing to obey all orders fall out over there. It wasn't even in terms of actually going back to work. It was kind of hidden.
- Robinson: I think going back to work was a stigmatism for us. You be chicken if you went back to work.
- Allen: I don't think they even said going back to work, I think they said after that. Well, the admiral did maybe, but the lieutenants. When they—
- Robinson: Got down to it. Now that you mention it, I kind of remember some kind of a situation like that. I kind of go along with that. There's so much I've forgotten or so much I just shut out. Because if you bring it back, I can agree with it; I can concur that something like that did happen. But exactly what they said, I don't remember.
- Allen: But in any case everybody winds up at Shoemaker? But at the time it's separated.
- Robinson: It's separated.
- Allen: Into the guys who are going to be eventually charged with the general, and the guys who are going to be given the summary. But I guess everybody was threatened with the general.
- Robinson: The general to start with.
- Allen: To start with, right—because they were trying to get the evidence or whatever.
- Robinson: I remember when they interrogated you—
- Allen: 'Cause another one of the guys who I talked to who was not in the fifty said—he said the things you were saying. Which is that when they interrogated you, they threatened you with the general. The way he put it, he says, “when they brought me in to talk to me, he said you're facing seven to fifteen years.” That was the standard opening of that. That was the way they started it.
- Robinson: Yeah, stuff like that if I remember...
- Allen: And then they started asking about who were the leaders and did this happen and that happen.
- Robinson: Yeah, I remember 'cause I went through this bit at home about when you get busted with the police. Who's the leader? They got fifteen people, they don't want to put everybody in jail, just want a couple of them. So I figure this is the same

situation. So I say, “If we don’t name nobody, we all go home.” That’s the way it used to be. Ain’t no leader; wasn’t going to put everybody in jail, but this system is a little different here.

Allen: What happened at Shoemaker? You were going to tell me a little bit about it—after you got put in prison up there. Some of the stuff that went down.

Robinson: Yeah. When we first got there the first day, they make you stand out well open field—they call it grinder. You stand there in front of your bag, your arms folded, see. Get there about 12:00. Standing around until seven at night. No bathroom, no nothing. Then they search every bag before you go in there, all your belongings. They take all your belongings, got a sea bag man. Well, if you’ve been in there a year, you’ve got all this garbage in there. I had ammunition in my bag; Holy Christ, the sergeant—that dude beat my head, boy. Yeah, he slapped me upside the head. He said, “I ought to take these bullets and ram ‘em up your rear.” I said, “well, you better start.” I got smart with the dude. He slapped me upside the head. He was pretty mad, ‘cause I was sarcastic, but I had no business with the ammunition, I guess. But at that point, you don’t care. See, these dudes going to put me in jail; they’re going to put me in there anyways, so what you gonna do. Talk to you, beat your ass anyway—so what the hell. You got to get even one day. Figure if you can make it so you got something to get even for.

Anyway, that’s the only physical treatment I ever had in the service from that. It embarrasses you, ‘cause he kicks you out of the damn place and you fell down in the sand and all this shit. If you jump up and hit the dude they’re going to shoot you. They got their guns there, you know. It’s like hitting the police officer in jail. Out in the street, you might get away with it—but at the jail, something else. But you figure, “well, I’ll get my chance.” That’s the only embarrassment I’ve ever had. I guess if I kept my mouth shut, I wouldn’t have got that. But that’s about the only one.

When you got there we went to stockade, and it was like any other prison that you go to. You’ve got trustees, which is as bad as prison guards. Then you’ve got mostly wounded Marines which you know off duty. And they were all white. Our duties were to make cargo nets and go on working parties. Working parties are like you go out and work in cold storage area, or you might work in the dispensary or something. I worked mostly in cold storage area—that’s loading boxes and stuff. And that was nice. That was the best duty I had in the Navy man. There was a chief petty officer in charge of the storage locker—where the stored food at. Used to take ten of us over there. And all of us would work. We had been working on loading ships, you know. They never saw anybody that could unload the trucks like we could. And you could run... like, we could run all day long. We go there six in the morning and work til five in the afternoon. We could run with the trucks all day. That’s the kind of shape we were in. You could take a truck off the dock and they put 400 pounds on it, but you could run with it. Run, run, run.

Negroes could work and they work so hard. The harder they worked the happier they got. Man, this is a fact. I mean, we used to fight when we laid around and didn't do no work. I guess a lot of people do that. You get bored you get short tempered. But we worked; when some work to do, we could work. And if we had to work against some people—like they had white prisoners out there working too, and finally he had no white prisoners at all up there at cold storage, it is all blacks. Because we can do an eight hour work working, the way he tell us we have four trucks to unload. If you have four trucks unloaded by 10:00, you can sit here the rest of the day and eat fruit and ice cream. That's what the chief petty officer tell us. That's how we run. We get in there, jack, unloading them trucks. I enjoyed that. We're sitting in the shade. Now it's hot. It was hot out there. But they had covered the channels in the hallway now between the cold storage locker and they were all like basically where you store mean at. It was freezers and stuff like that. You could sit on the floor there. You get on the corridor, you sit down on the corridor so that the guard one of the corridor and the guard on the other. Now the chasers, chasers were SP's. Now, they take twenty guys out there and they had one guard to every ten chasers. So there's only two guys trying to keep up with these twenty guys. Running back and forth with trucks like a mad man. After a while, they just figure they couldn't do it; so they just stood on perimeter. And the guys wouldn't try to escape. That was good duty there. The chief was nice 'cause he'd give us ice cream, we'd eat fruit. If we did the job, we sit there at 10:00. We stay there the rest of the day, don't go back. That was one of the nice things about being there. Once you got back to that prison, it was something else. Stockade and barbed wires and stuff.

Allen: So how long were you there in Shoemaker?

Robinson: Let's see; it seemed like a long time, but I guess it wasn't. Maybe a month at the most, I guess.

Allen: Then you were shipped out overseas?

Robinson: Yeah.

Allen: Where did you wind up overseas?

Robinson: Well, we went to New Caledonia.

Allen: Did you all go together? Or how did they ship you out?

Robinson: Yes, we all went to New Caledonia together. But then we got separated.

Allen: Everybody who's at Shoemaker went to?

Robinson: Same ship, same time. Shipped us all out at the same time. Then when we got to New Caledonia, that was a receiving station, so they divided us up into base

companies. Then there was a base company that had a reputation of rioting and badness. They'd bust them all and send them back to prison. That was Base Company Nineteen they called it, it must have been a bad outfit over there. 'Cause when they put us in there, there wasn't nobody left but a few guys. Anyway, Base Company Nineteen I think it was, ten, must have been twenty. It's in here someplace. That's the guy I told you that we had a real meek officer from Connecticut someplace. He would shoot you if you pat him on the rear. He was alright, I guess, he was fair enough. Then a lot of guys got shipped to a different Island. Some guys went to Guam. They had the riot up there? Some of those guys were from our outfit that went to Guam I think.

Allen: Is that so?

Robinson: I'm sure they were. Because some went to Guam. Some, I don't know where. That's when we got mixed up with some other people. Mixed in with something else. But anyway, they shipped em all over the Pacific. We used to write to each other. Some of us went to Saigon. We all just went and got put in different outfits, different places. Yeah, some went to New Hebrides, too, We had letters from people in New Hebrides. Yeah, all the islands down on the Solomon's and all those areas.

Allen: So that was about another year, then. A year duty overseas, then back stateside.

Robinson: Back to stateside. But once we got into this outfit the stigmatism was gone, it was covered up until the time it came for a promotion. Then you get them do-gooders. Well, I shouldn't use that word. Guys that want to give you justice. I work for a guy by the name of Dave. Since I met him out here, he's in Burbank out here in California. He wants me to come over. I'm gonna be a body and fender man. I want a promotion. They say well since you've been there so long you're entitled to become a petty officer now, providing you haven't been in the brig. Once you say you had, {inaudible/laughter} what kind did you have? They say "Oh, you're one of them guys. "It wasn't really bad stigmatism. I met some pretty nice guys after I left from New Caledonia. That was a nice place too.

Allen: Well looking back on it all, these many years later, how do you feel about it now?

Robinson: Well, I look at the good things I've learned from it. Well one thing about it, it allowed me to go back to school. GI Bill you know. I thought it was pretty lousy because well at the time I figured I was entitled to a better job than I got. I figure I wanted to go to radio school. I had a lot of experience in electronics and electricity and radio before I went in see. I had a good educational background. For some reason, I guess, they had their own methods. The guys who couldn't read and write—which were quite a few in my outfit—they sent those guys to school, the guys who could read and write, the smarter you were, the worse your job got. And then the most illiterate you got the most, like the guys who went to quartermaster school. That's steering ships and shooting the sun, stuff like this.

Well, I couldn't complain cause like Meryl Miley, two years college experience, and he was down there working on the docks. He was a football star. He's from Ohio State. He wasn't the only guy, because what happened when they start letting the guys take black people take the officers candidate examination test. There was some kind of restriction where you couldn't take this, I guess. No, if you had passed it you had to stay in four more years. You'd become regular something, so he wouldn't take it. I felt I learned a lot from it. But I thought we got a short deal out of it.

Allen: What about the strike itself, the resistance, looking back on that?

Robinson: I think I wouldn't change that. The experience was great. I think it was worth the effort—the effort showing that whatever you believe in, you at least tried to back what you believed in the best you know how. We just didn't know how to do it, that's all. You're out there by yourself, eighteen. Well, everybody wasn't eighteen-years old, there's some older guys there. But we just didn't have the intelligence to handle the situation. If we had more intelligence we'd done a lot better job. But to think about it, I feel kind of bad about it because it's like fighting a dude with a big gun, and you ain't got nothing but a twig. You think you gonna fight the guy because you didn't use the right method. I talked to a guy at work the other day for the same thing. Another guy in my group that's almost seven foot, a white guy. Now he's a giant, no fat on him at all. A guy in my group who's 5'6"—

[End of Interview]