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University of California
Berkeley, California

Joe Small: Port Chicago Oral History Project

Interviews conducted and donated by
Robert Allen
in 1980, 1978, 1985

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Joe Small, Joe Small: Port Chicago Oral History Project” conducted by Robert Allen in 1980, 1978, 1985, Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1985.

Joe Small was born in 1921 in Savannah, Georgia, growing up on a New Jersey farm until he was drafted in to fight in World War II in 1943. Small served as a first class seaman in the Navy at Port Chicago Naval Magazine as a winch operator loading ammunition on ships. After the deadly explosion in July 1944, Small became seen as the de facto leader of the Port Chicago Fifty, a group of Black sailors charged with mutiny after refusing to return to the deadly and unsafe working conditions on the base. In these interviews, Small discusses his experiences being drafted into the Navy, the working conditions and racial discrimination at Port Chicago, his role in the work stoppage, the trial proceedings, and his life after leaving the Navy.

Interview 1: December 6, 1977

Allen: Right, what I'll do is—I'll transcribe the interview myself, and then when I write it up for my dissertation, I will send you a copy for your okay. If I want to use any quotes. If there's any problem, I'll just paraphrase it or if you don't want to use it at all, we can do that. Okay. Why don't we get started here. This is your home right?

Small: Yes, in this vicinity, not in Somerset, we're from New Brunswick which is across the highway.

Allen: How is it that you went into the Navy in the first place?

Small: Well, I was drafted. And the Navy was a by chance situation, because it was two of us, close friends. And when we went through our physical the doctor asked us which one wants to go in the Army and neither one of us answered. He just grabbed a stamp and went "bam." He looked at it and says, "Alright, move out soldier." My buddy happened to be ahead of me and so he got the Army I got the Navy. That's the way I got into it. I didn't choose to be in it. I'm glad that I got into the Navy after I found out what life in the Army consisted of. I'm glad that I got the Navy.

Allen: So you then went to Great Lakes naval training?

Small: Yes, Camp Roberts Small.

Allen: What year was that?

Small: '43—June or July.

Allen: So you were there for six weeks of training.

Small: Yeah, six weeks I don't know exactly what date I left, but when I left there I came home for leave then I went back then they shipped me out to Port Chicago.

Allen: So you went there directly from Great Lakes.

Small: Yes.

Allen: Did you have any expectations that you were going to sea? Did you have any idea that you would be going to Port Chicago as opposed to going to sea?

Small: Well, no. See they really...they refused to give us any information as to our destination. That time there was this slogan going around, "Slip of the lip will sink a ship." For that reason we didn't know where we

were going. We didn't know whether we were going overseas, we wound up at Port Chicago, and we only found that out after we arrived there. We were in their work battalion at Port Chicago. The work there was landing ships with ammunition and weapons for review shipment.

Allen: You were in the Fourth Division. That was with [Ernest] Delucchi.

Small: Yeah.

Allen: And so you were in the Fourth Division from the very beginning then. From August 1943?

Small: Just about middle part of '43 to after the explosion which was July 14, 1944.

Allen: Actually I think it's July seventh. So you were actually involved in the loading from the very beginning.

Small: Oh yeah, I was a winch operator. We took the ammunition from box cars and transferred it to the ship.

Allen: Did they have facilities for training you at Port Chicago or did you just pick that up?

Small: Well, I was always adaptive at handling machines. Anything I saw or anybody else do, after ten minutes I could pick it up myself. I got into that as I have many jobs since then, the winch operator got sick he went down in the hold to sleep and I just took his job. When the petty officer came back he found me at the controls. He says, "Where's Harry?" "Harry got sick." He watched me for a few minutes, and that's how I got the job.

Allen: In your view, what were the safety procedures like?

Small: There weren't any. Let me describe our methods to you. The boxcar come in on the tracks in the center of the dock. They would open the door and the bombs would be stacked—four, five, or six high inside the car. And they would put a ramp from the bottom of the top layer down to the dock. They would hang mats on the side of the ship. And the men would turn the bombs and roll them down the ramp and they would hit this mat beside the ship. Somebody would throw a piece of dunnage to keep it from rolling back to the ramp again. Then they would roll it around and roll it on the wire net. After we got the net loaded with four or five bombs, we lifted into the ship.

Allen: Were there officers around during the loading?

- Small: Well, that's hard to say yes or no, because they would show up periodically to check on the tonnage that was going abroad and how the work was progressing. But to say that an officer was constantly there—no. We had a petty officer—usually a third class petty officer or second class petty officer—that was over the actual work. Lieutenant Delucchi was over our division. He was very seldom there.
- Allen: What about the pace of the work itself. Was it very fast or varied or what?
- Small: Well, we were pushed. Let me say it this way: they used to bet—pit one division against the other. And the officers themselves used to bet on their division, putting on more tonnage on the ship than the other divisions. I often heard them argue what division was beating the others in a prescribed length of time. So we were pushed by the petty officers to get the tonnage in.
- Allen: And you were, in turn, pushed by the officers.
- Small: And we were, in turn, pushed by the officers.
- Allen: And this had been going on from the beginning?
- Small: Oh, yes, it was going on from the time we arrived there. See the only white men on that base was lieutenant and up. Everything below lieutenant was black. So that made it a segregated base. And you were the ones doing the work. The lieutenant would say, "I bet my division will put on more in eight hours than yours will." I don't know what they used as a wager but I used to hear them making the wager.
- Allen: Did they offer any kind of reward or inducement to the enlisted men to speed up the loading?
- Small: Well, rather than being an inducement to speed up the loading it was a lack of punishment was your reward; in other words, if you didn't put on as much as he thought you should put on, then your liberty was canceled, or your liberty was cut short. There was no extra liberty for doing more work. But you lost privileges if you didn't.
- Allen: Do you recall seeing a bulletin board that was put up somewhere around the pier in which they posted the tonnage every day?
- Small: No.
- Allen: Because I came across it in testimony from this captain, Kenny, in which he had admitted that he put up a bulletin board. There was some testimony about this whole thing, the competition and racing. And

they've denied it, the officers did. But he admitted that he put up this bulletin board which he posted the tonnage every day. Some of the lieutenants said that they took that to mean that they were being encouraged by him to compete, get as much tonnage as possible.

Small: I don't remember having seen that. Now, I do remember that there was a bulletin board at the front gate.

Allen: To the whole base, but not to the actual pier?

Small: No it was at the front gate, entrance to the whole base. Well the whole base was the same thing. The whole base was a working depot. How can I say it... anything that was at the front gate was specifically meant for us, and it dealt with us. There was no other men there, other than the men that loaded the ships.

Allen: Right. Okay.

Small: I mean in as much as where a base might consist of a fighter battalion, or a guard battalion, or a cavalry battalion, all on the same base. Everything on this base was a working battalion.

Allen: What was the state of the relations between the officers and the men? Were there much problems?

Small: Well, there was a lot of problems, but we weren't in a position to do anything about them. The base was muddy; there was no recreational facilities there. We waded in mud ankle-deep.

Allen: What about the town itself—the little town of Port Chicago? Was there anything there?

Small: No, nothing. We went to Oakland, San Francisco, and to Pittsburgh. Port Chicago was a town where you went to catch the bus. There was nothing there; recreation-wise, there was nothing.

Allen: Could you go into cafes or anything that were in the town, or was it strictly segregated?

Small: Well, now I don't know. Because I never, in the whole time I was there I don't believe I went to Port Chicago for anything but to catch a bus.

Allen: But you could get a bus from there to say Oakland or Pittsburgh? Was that Navy provided?

Small: No that was public transportation. The Navy ran a bus from Port Chicago to the base. And we would ride the Navy bus to Port Chicago. And then we would catch public transportation.

Allen: Okay. So you would work in an eight-hour shift, and you'd have some liberty time or, what was the set up there?

Small: Well depending on what shift you worked. See I mean if we worked the day shift then we had we usually had liberty that night. We were free until 5:00-5:30 the next morning, when reveille sounded. But if we worked, say the second shift from four to twelve, then we weren't allowed out. Or if we worked the midnight shift, from twelve to eight in the morning, we were allowed out 'til eight or nine that night. We had to be back in. So your liberty depended on what shift you went in.

Allen: I guess that wasn't really that much time to go off very far?

Small: Oh no. Well, if you went to Oakland or Frisco or Berkeley. I mean it was an hour and a half ride to Oakland. They had scheduled buses leaving Oakland coming back to Port Chicago just to bring servicemen. A special bus for us. It was public transportation, but it was especially for us. And the last bus out of Pittsburg was 1:30 in the morning. Last bus out of Oakland was around 2:00-2:15. Those buses would get you back to Port Chicago in time for reveille.

Allen: Was there any kind of training given to the men for this work at Port Chicago at all?

Small: No, no training. Actually there wasn't any training necessary. It was just back breaking labor. The only skill necessary was in shoring up the ammunition in the hold of the ship. And they had the ship's carpenters do that. Our job was to unload the boxcar and get it in the hold of the ship. And then they had a crew that could place it where the carpenters wanted it. There was no skill there other than operating the winch.

Allen: Did the men have any specific grievances?

Small: Yeah, we had plenty of grievances. I mean, eating conditions, the recreational facilities, there was nothing there. We had plenty grievances, but we talked about it among ourselves. It was never brought to any demonstration.

Allen: There was no possibility of bringing it to the attention of higher authority or getting any kind of changes?

Small: Well, I'll tell you something. At that time we considered our position almost the norm. You know what I mean, I mean the Navy up to that time had no black people in it. And being in the Navy, being able to sleep between white sheets and have three square meals a day, three hot meals a day, this was a privilege that the black men hadn't enjoyed; and so we didn't put up much of a squawk about it. I was next in command to the petty officer. I was unofficially the division leader, because the petty officer we had were incompetent, and the men depended on me more than they depended on the petty officers. And I was a first class seaman. That is why after the explosion I was placed in the breach for the whole thing because they considered me more the leader than they did the petty officers.

Allen: Wiley and Gay were petty officers?

Small: But their concern for the men was nothing. And I was the one that mingled with the men and the one that they looked to when they had a grievance. They came to me about it and I couldn't do anything about it but go to the petty officers, and that's where it died. So when the explosion came and the question was asked, are you going back to work? Well the lieutenant, he asked me first because I welded marched in banks. I assumed the position of cadence caller, they accepted. I marched outside of banks and called cadence. When the men had a grievance they come to me, and when it was time to get up in the morning I woke them up because the petty officers come through shouting things like "Get your hands off your cocks and put on your socks!" That was one of their favorite. Then, if you were slow getting out of bed, they would grab the mattress and dump you out of bed. They used their weight a lot. And being black, the men didn't appreciate that. They didn't think this was necessary; coming from a white man, they would have accepted that, seriously nothing wrong with it. But from one of our own color, we wouldn't accept it. So they more or less accepted me as the division leader. So when Lieutenant Delucchi asked the question, "Small, will you return to work?" I said no. Somebody over in the ranks said, "If Small don't go, we're not going either."

Allen: When was that—that was after the explosion?

Small: After the explosion. We were at—

Allen: Shoemaker?

Small: Shoemaker. We expected this to come. The morning that they broke us out in ranks and we marched out toward the drill field, see we had to make a turn, to turn right you were going to the drill field, turn left meant you were going to the docks. And so when we got to this

intersection, the command came “column left” and everybody stopped—turning different ways. So I was calling cadence, and Lieutenant Delucchi called me to the front and he said, “Small are you going back to work?” I said, “No.” Said, “Why?” “Because I’m afraid.” That was a lie. I wasn’t afraid. But I knew the situation under which we had worked, and it hadn’t been changed. So I wasn’t going. I had made up my mind that I wasn’t going back to work under these conditions. Somebody yelled in the ranks if Small’s not going we’re not going either. So that made me the spokesman. And it had been that way ever since we’d been at Port Chicago. I was more or less the spokesman.

- Allen: So you had discussed it with them before the actual situation and you were ordered to?
- Small: Well, not discussed it, as much as men had come to me and told me what they intended to do. And I hadn’t asked anybody. [Small introduces his wife to Allen] Anyhow they had come to me, explained the situation, and asked me what was I going to do about it. I told them I’m not going back, and that was it. So I think it was about five or six that knew what I was going to do. And it was one of these five or six that said if Small don’t go we’re not going either. So then they separated the men, all that would go, stand fast. The ones that refused to go, move out. So everybody moved out. They picked fifty out of the 250 to court martial
- Allen: And the other men were given summary?
- Small: I don’t know. I’m gonna tell you I don’t know what they got. I heard that some of them went back to work, some of them returned to the dock, and some of them that didn’t return to work received light sentences.
- Allen: Did you expect the mutiny charge?
- Small: No, that was a surprise. Well, see this mutiny charge came up after I talked with Admiral—
- Allen: Admiral Wright.
- Small: Wright. I talked to him and he explained to me that I was the one that the men would follow. If I return to work, the rest of the men would. So I told him I wouldn’t return to work under the conditions under which he worked. I found out, during my stay there, that \$250,000 had been appropriate for modernization of the base. And that \$250,000 had disappeared. {inaudible} Now, immediately after the explosion they went to work on the base, and between the time, we did sixteen

months at San Diego, but when we got a chance to go back to the base, the base was modern they had modern facilities there, bowling alley, movie house, paved streets. But when we were there, there was nothing. We had curbs. And we walked on the curb from our barracks we walked across the board to the curb and walked down the curb, and then waded through the mud to go to the mess hall. No sidewalks no streets, just a curb. So I told him under the conditions that I worked I wouldn't go back. So he said, "If you don't go back to work, I'm gonna have you shot." And then I lost my temper. I said, "You could go ahead and shoot me, 'cause I'm not going back." And it was after this that the mutiny charge came up.

- Allen: Was this a private meeting with him, or was that the meeting on the ball field where he came out and spoke to all the men?
- Small: No, this was a private meeting, he and I in his office.
- Allen: What's the \$250,000, how did you find out about that?
- Small: It was scuttlebutt going around to me that this had been appropriated. And all the men believed it because it was obvious that this should have been done.
- Allen: Hadn't they just started construction on a new recreation building or something around the time of the explosion or—?
- Small: After the explosion. After the explosion they started construction on this recreation building that had a bowling alley in it, swimming pool, movie house, movie theater and everything was in it. But nothing was done prior to the explosion. And the explosion is what opened everything up. If it had not been for the explosion, I doubt that anything would have been done. When this explosion occurred, then it opened everything up. Incidentally that explosion was predicted about months before it happened.
- Allen: Who predicted it?
- Small: I did. Everybody there knew it was coming. I used to tell Lieutenant Delucchi—I said, "Lieutenant, one of these days this base is going to blow sky high." He said, "Well, if it does. You won't know anything about it. Don't worry about it." That was his answer. And you'll find that in the records of the court martial.
- Allen: In what—in your testimony?
- Small: In my testimony, you'll find that in the records of the court martial. Unless they struck it from the records. Beause a lot of the things that I

said in my testimony was struck from the records as being what's the word they use—

Allen: Did you get a copy of the record?

Small: Yes, every one of us had a copy of the record. That thing was so cumbersome there was no place for us to protect it and they wouldn't let us mail it home. I wanted to mail mine home for safekeeping and they wouldn't let us mail it. It got destroyed during my travels. I wish I could have kept it, I wanted to, I wanted to preserve it and have it made into a book— [interruption] The testimony—a lot of the testimony that I gave during the trial was stricken from the records, struck from the records as being what's the word they use, not unimportant—

Allen: Irrelevant?

Small: Irrelevant, yeah. So, a lot of the things that went on between the men prior to this trial was not up to par—and I admit that they had us billeted on a barge, and the barge was built to house about seventy-five or eighty men. There was 250 of us on one. And we had several men among us that was hot tempered and fought easily and carried concealed weapons, carried knives and things. And several incidents on the way to the mess hall, they marched us to the mess hall in groups and one guard got stabbed at night and they never found out who did it—

Allen: This was after the explosion?

Small: After the explosion, yes.

Allen: So, that was what? August ninth, about three, four days? On the barge.

Small: So they came to me, and they asked me if I could do anything about the conduct of the men, because they said they didn't want to shoot any of us. And they armed the guards and they said, "Now the slightest provocation, we will shoot." So they asked me to talk to the men.

Allen: Who asked you?

Small: It was a guard officer. I don't know who he was.

Allen: A white guy?

Small: It was a white guy, yes.

- Allen: The guards were, the shore patrol was black, and the Marine guards were white. Is that right?
- Small: The shore patrol was mixed. But all of the Marines were white.
- Allen: And you had Marine guards on that barge there?
- Small: We had Marine guards, but we had shore patrol escorts.
- Allen: You were saying that a white Marine guard asked you to speak to the men.
- Small: Yeah, one of the, he was an officer in the Marine guard. I don't know what rank he had. He asked me if I could do anything to quiet the men down. So, I called a meeting on the barge and I talked to them. And I used a statement that I never should have used, but they took the thing completely out of context. I said, "We have them—," well I'll say now, "in the palm of our hand." Then I used a derogatory phrase.
- Allen: Yeah, I think I read that.
- Small: All right. And, "They can do nothing to us if we don't do anything to them." See what I mean? And what I meant by it was that they can't shoot us, because they had threatened to line us up and shoot us and everything. So I was attempting to quiet their fears, and that was meant so they would turn in all their weapons, because they were arming themselves, so that they might fight back if their lives were threatened. Somebody in our bunch went out and told what I had said. And this was one of the prime testimonies for the prosecution. They harped on that. "You said you've got the Navy by the balls," see what I mean. I said, "Yes, I said it." I said, "But you're taking it completely out of context. My meaning for saying that is all lost. And you're making a threat out of it and it wasn't meant to be a threat." And that was stricken from the records—that statement was stricken from the records. So a lot of things was changed and when it all boiled down, we were found guilty of mutiny—fifty of us.
- Allen: Seems like somebody else spoke at that meeting and there was some controversy about what they said.
- Small: Yes. I think his name was Miller.
- Allen: Matthew Miller?
- Small: Matthew Miller—I think that was his name. We called him "Slick." I think his name was Matthew. We also spoke at the meeting. But then during the trial it was argued back and forth as to what he said and

what I said and what I didn't say and what he didn't say and we had five shave tail lietenants. as defense lawyers and {inaudible}.

Allen: Now, when did Thurgood Marshall get involved?

Small: During the trial. During the trial, we heard that Thurgood Marshall was there from NAACP. And I never had a meeting with him to sit down and talk with him, but we understood that he was there. And several other prominent black people we heard were there. But we never had a chance to talk to them.

Allen: During the trial itself, there was no direct contact with him?

Small: No, not that I can remember.

Allen: But he did come to the trial?

Small: He did come. He did come.

Allen: He made some statements to the press.

Small: He did come. Who was it that started that Port Chicago fund? Somebody started a fund for Port Chicago boys. It wasn't Thurgood Marshall. I remember somebody starting a fund and it was rumored that they'd gotten \$150,000 for our defense, or something like that. And then it just petered out and we didn't hear any more about it. 'Cause we were confined, we had no contact with the outside world other than letters that they allowed us to write and letters they allowed to come it. Our letters were delivered to the guard opened, unsealed, and we received our letters censored. Anything in there they didn't want us to know was blacked out. And I imagine that our letters going out they did the same thing with them. They cut out anything that they thought might be dangerous.

Allen: So, you never knew who was behind this fund, or whether it actually existed?

Small: No. I'm quite sure that it existed. It was somebody in Chicago, if I remember. Now I forget—

Allen: But it wasn't the NAACP. It was separate from NAACP.

Small: This was separate from the NAACP, yes. It wasn't NAACP. It was a private lobbyist. And he was prominent at that time. He was in all the news at that time. I'm trying to think of his name. He was from Chicago—

- Allen: A black man?
- Small: He was a black man.
- Allen: What about the guy from, Lester Grange from the National Urban League?
- Small: He wasn't connected with any organization like that. He was a private man, I believe his was. He was more or less in show business, something like that. 'Cause as I remember, somebody had told us that the fund had reached \$150,000. And we were supposed to get three private lawyers and two court-appointed lawyers. But it wound up we had five court appointed lawyers, no private lawyers, and then it just dropped off the scene, and nothing was heard about it. There was a prominent black woman, too, that came down there. I can't think of her name—'cause I saw her.
- Allen: The woman who does the Negro handbook, maybe that's who it was? One of the things I found about the case was that the Negro handbook in 1947 had a long article written by a black woman about the case that was later reprinted in one or two other books where there was some mention of it. But I've got it at home, I can send you her name—
- Small: Well, anyhow I never done any digging into it, cause I didn't want to stir up the thing and then there was never that much interest to me anyhow because it was over and done... with and I always thought that someday somebody would contact me to write a book about this thing or something like that, especially being such a prominent part of Negro history—military history anyhow.
- Allen: Yeah, well you don't find it in any history book.
- Small: I know you don't. I haven't heard—you're the first I heard—you're the first one that has said anything to me about it since then. No one has breathed a word about it.
- Allen: When I found out about it, the first thing I did was go back through black history books that I had and tried to find it and it wasn't even mentioned, no. One, John Hope Franklin, the great Black historian, in his book he has one paragraph. Not even a paragraph, it's like two sentences and it's wrong, he got the facts wrong about what happened—but nowhere else will you find it. You don't find it in any military, they wiped it out. There is only one military history book that they have anything about it, and that's a book called "Integration of the Negro into the Navy," and they have about two paragraphs on it there. Basically I guess they couldn't avoid saying something.

- Small: Yeah, well that was our integration into the Navy. That was it. That was a great part of it right there.
- Allen: Was there any logic to the fifty men they picked out—why that particular group of fifty men out of the 250 who refused initially?
- Small: Well, they were the fifty men they picked out were the most nervy men. They were the ones that would stand up against the Navy. They were the ones that didn't talk cowardly or accept anything came along. There was—the fifty men that they picked were all loud mouths. Let me say it that way. Loud mouths and fighters. And most of the men—the 200 men that they didn't pick were of a docile character, that's all. I mean, that's the only thing I can lay it to because all the men that were in prison with me were known to be fellows that were fighters, if you crammed them. If they felt that they had a right to something, they would put up a squawk about it.
- Allen: Do you remember Ollie Green?
- Small: Yeah.
- Allen: He was an older guy, about thirty-eight?
- Small: Yeah, he was older.
- Allen: Was there some guy of fight or conflict between him and Cy Sheppard after the trial? Do you recall that?
- Small: I don't really know. I seem to recall something, but it's not clear in my mind. I remember Wideman, he was a practical joker. I remember Ollie Green, he was an old fellow. I remember Cy Sheppard, he was a light fellow about your complexion right, not as tall as you, smaller built. I remember him. But I don't remember any conflict between him and Green.
- Allen: 'Cause in Ollie Green's testimony I remember there was, yeah, his hand was in a cast, and at some point they asked him how did his hand happen to be in a cast or something. And he said he got it while—he fell down while he was running to chow or something. And that cracked everybody up in the court, according to a report I read, and that upset Sheppard so much that he took it out on Ollie Green later on. You don't recall that happening? And this fellow, the guy who had the nervous condition, Julius Dixon, he was the young guy about nineteen, one of the very young guys. He never worked on the—they never had him loading ammunition, yet he was one of the fifty who was ordered to load the ammunition, even though in the past they had never had

him out there loading ammunition-- because they said he was a hazard. Was it Dixon? I think it was Dixon, it wasn't Wideman.

- Small: Julius Dixon. I knew a Julius Dixon, he went to CC Camp with me, but he wasn't in the Navy with me. Julius Dixon he lives out here in Piscataway now. But I don't remember Julius Dixon.
- Allen: Maybe he was in one of the other divisions.
- Small: He probably was. But I don't remember him. I remember Wideman specifically because I used to lay in my bunk at night and couldn't go to sleep until I knew that he was in his bunk and asleep.
- Allen: Why—?
- Small: He was a practical joker. We had large Honeywell heaters in the barracks, one at each end. He would come in 3:00 in the morning, and take newspaper and stick it in the fan. They had a big fan, behind the heater, he would stick newspaper in the fan and then laugh when the men would burst out of their bunks and rush to the door. This was immediately after the explosion. Then he would stand up there and laugh. He would turn all the lights on at once and holler, "Fire!" I mean this was all a joke to him—know what I mean. I saw one night particular what really upset me—that's when I asked them to move him out of our barracks, he—we had an ironing board getting right by the heater and the ironing board had a piece of sheet over it to iron on. And I laid in my bunk and watched him slide that sheet off and guide that sheet until it caught in the fan, and when it got caught in the fan, he jumped back behind the heater and there was I think thirty-eight men in the barracks and all of them headed for that back door at the same time. And the bunks were lined up here but at the end of the barrack there was a room on each side and it narrowed down to an aisle and at the end of this aisle was the door. And these thirty-eight men tried to squeeze into that aisle and go out that door at the same time. And several of them got hurt pretty bad. And he's standing up there laughing. So that next morning I requested that he be moved out of our barracks. They moved him out; I don't know what they did with him. I don't think I remember seeing him again since, 'til at the trial. But they moved him. Yea, I remember him specifically.
- Allen: Something else they brought out at the trial, around which there was a lot of argument, too—and that was this whole question of the list, the so-called list that the men signed, or some men signed and some men didn't. Do you remember anything about that?
- Small: I think do remember a list when they had up a list as to who would go back to work and who wouldn't. It was a petition, mostly. It was a

petition that they weren't going back to work and they were asking them to sign it.

Allen: Some of the men themselves were circulating this?

Small: Yes, I think it was gotten up among the men themselves. But this petition we never delivered to anybody and, as a matter of fact, I believe I was instrumental in having it destroyed, because when they came to me and expressed their opinion to me concerning about going back to work, that's when I found out about the petition. And I destroyed that petition myself. But the wind of it got out, but the petition was never produced. They never saw the petition; it was just rumored that it was around, because I destroyed that myself. When we were at the barracks at—

Allen: Shoemaker.

Small: Shoemaker.

Allen: It was a petition—well, what did it say? Beside this being a list of signatures, did it have a statement, something like that?

Small: No I think, as I recalled, it was just a grievance. I don't think there was any statement on the top of the petition. But they would ask the man, "are you going back to work?" and he said, "No." "Well, sign your name here." You see what I mean. And that was the gist of it. I don't think there was any definite statement at the top as to we refuse to go back to work or anything like that.

Allen: But the men intended it as a petition.

Small: They intended it as a petition. We were of the opinion that if we got a favorable decision from the majority of the men, that those in charge would consider that-- you see what I mean. In other words, out of the 250 men, if we got the majority of those men to say that they were afraid to go back to work, then it would be considered. But I destroyed the petition because I knew that this wouldn't happen. So when they asked me that morning, "Small, will you go back?" He didn't address the whole company, he addressed me. "Small, front and center." And I marched up and across and stopped directly in front of him. He was up on a platform. He said, "Small, I order you to go back to work."

Allen: This was Delucchi.

Small: This was Delucchi. And I didn't answer him. And he said, "Small, will you go back to work, yes or no?" And I said, "No." Somebody in the ranks said, "If Small don't go we won't go either." He turned blood

red and stormed off the platform and left us standing there and we stood there about an hour. Then the Marines came down, and we burst out the marching and took us back to the barracks.

Allen: What kind of guy, was this guy Delucchi?

Small: He was a very hot-tempered, red-necked cracker. That's what he was. And if things didn't go his way, he was very quick to punish you for it. The greatest punishment they had there was restricting our liberty. They had no other punishment. There was no brig there, per se. And they could put us on KP [kitchen patrol]; but on KP you got better food than you did if you came in to eat. So men didn't mind the KP. The only places for liberty, like I said was Berkeley or Oakland or Frisco or Pittsburg. And Pittsburg was segregated; there was only one street in Pittsburg that we could go on. It was a big Army camp, Camp Stoneman, was in Pittsburg. The only street that we could go on was Black Diamond Street. When we got off the bus, they had a prescribed course for us to walk to Black Diamond Street. Black Diamond Street was a street that was built on a jetty, and the buildings on each side jutted out and hang out over the water. In other words, you can step up in the front door of the building on solid ground; but if you stepped out the back door, you stepped into fifteen to twenty feet of water. The buildings was set on piers. And all the restaurants and the night clubs the cafes and everything was down there. Now, in Oakland, Seventh Street, and Berkeley. We had the free run of Berkeley, but there was nothing in Berkeley. Berkeley was residential. So Seventh Street in Oakland, and Black Diamond Street in Pittsburg was the only towns when we had liberty. You could Frisco in the Fillmore district, but we very seldom went over there, because that meant prostitutes over there and we really didn't have enough liberty to go over there anyhow. Our liberty wasn't long enough unless it was on a weekend liberty or something like that.

Allen: Speaking of Oakland— who was this guy Rawlins? In the testimony they were asking about somebody named Rawlins.

Small: I don't remember that name... I know there was a place we used to frequent there. I think it was called Club Seven. It was on Seventh Street. I think it was called the Club Seven and most of the fellas hung out in there, but I don't know what the owners name is. I don't remember a Rawlins specifically.

Allen: Club Seven, huh? Where were you when the explosion actually happened?

Small: I was in my bunk. See our division had come off of work that morning at 7:00

- Allen: So you had worked on those two ships, then?
- Small: Oh yes.
- Allen: The [SS E.A.] Bryan and the [SS] Quinault Victory.
- Small: The Wormington.
- Allen: Now that was there too. The ones that were destroyed was the EA Bryan and a new ship called Quinault Victory. They were just starting to load it then.
- Small: Well now you see, that's where we got mixed up because the Bryan we were working on the [SS] Mormactern, we were loading the Mormactern. And the Mormactern was scheduled to sail with the tide, that morning. We came off the docks at 7:00 and the explosion was about twenty-two minutes past ten that night. Now I saw the Mormactern and the Bryan but now I recall the Mormactern was supposed to sail with the tide that night. So I didn't know what ship had replaced the Mormactern. See what I mean. But I do know that the new ship that came in was the one that blew up. And it set off the other ship. Now the Bryan, when we left that morning it had about 12,000 ton on it. We had buttoned up the Mormactern. She was ready for sea. Her gun was about two feet out of the water.
- Allen: Yeah, well she left.
- Small: So if she sailed with the tide that morning and then this new ship came in her place, see, that was the one that blew up. And we never found out. We knew that two ships blew up down there, but it was never told to us that the Mormactern had sailed.
- Allen: Well it was this new ship, the Quinault Victory that came in—In fact it was brand new, this would have been the maiden voyage.
- Small: See that never came out. We never knew that.
- Allen: It had just come from the shipyards, where it had been constructed. I think it was up in Seattle, someplace up North, had come down to San Francisco. This was to be its first run. And it blew up.
- Small: Well anyhow, that explosion, see, what everybody on the dock got killed. I understand with the exception of one man, and he was in a shed asleep. He was supposed to be working, he was in the shed sleeping. He got injured pretty bad, but he was the one man whose life was saved. 375 men I think, that was reported to us who lost their lives.

But it tore down the barracks that we were in. It tore them up like they were match boxes.

Allen: Yeah, I've got pictures. In fact, what I can do is send them to you.

Small: I'd appreciate that, because I never saw any.

Allen: They had some photographs made of the base before the explosion, at the time of explosion, and then when they rebuilt it later. You're right, the changes what they did afterwards was just incredible. They obviously put a whole lot of money into rebuilding that.

Small: That never started until after that explosion. After the explosion was all of that remodeling and things started. Because up to the time of that explosion, it was nothing done. So I don't know what else can I tell you.

Allen: Well, this has been very helpful. Well, after the trial, you went down to San Diego—twenty-two months or about a year and a half, right?

Small: Well, let's see. I don't remember now just how long. They were about sixteen months we actually did of our fifteen-year sentence. Some men—I was sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor, then to be dishonorably discharged from the US Navy. And I understand that some of the other men got twelve years, fifteen years.

Allen: It varied, yeah.

Small: But when we went there, we went as a group—I think I was there for about sixteen months. But I was confined there at the San Pedro Federal Penitentiary. What did they call it.

Allen: San Pedro?

Small: San Pedro, yes. We were confined there about fifteen, sixteen months. And in that sixteen months, we never had any trouble of any major kind. We used to get into a lot of junk between ourselves, you know, some fights, stuff like that. But we were a separated group. Nobody bothered us and we don't bother nobody. We had our own work details and they usually kept us together evidently. Because they used to refer to us as the "PC Niggers." They refer to us, "Yeah, you one of 'em PC Niggers." And we had a reputation for being unruly and bad, and therefore we had very little trouble. [interruption] They picked us out in groups of five and they put us on board a ship and they shipped us out. And we rode. We had no duties. Nothing to do but make mess call, roam around the ship, and sleep. And I don't know how long we were out but we wound up in Seattle, Washington.

- Allen: But you went out—? Did you go out to the Pacific?
- Small: Yeah, we went to Okinawa. We just rode, just rode, back forth from one port to another. We never left the ship. Just on the ship that's all. They said that they were conditioning us for a discharge. And we wouldn't get a dishonorable discharge, we would get discharged under honorable conditions. But we had to go back to duty. And it would go in our records that we had been rehabilitated to the extent that we are accepting as qualifying duty, and then we would get discharged under honorable conditions. I think this was some compromise of some group, I don't know who the group was. But we seemed to think that some black group had gotten with the Navy, and come up with the compromise, to set aside the dishonorable discharge. But we just rode, no duties, nothing to do just—
- Allen: When was that, for several months?
- Small: Yeah that was for, I can't remember now. How long it was. But we wound up we came back, it was...I was in Frisco for a long time. We was on Treasure Island and Frisco. And then they gave us a ship, I went to Seattle, Washington. I got discharged from Seattle, Washington. I don't remember now just how that happened. I know that we left Pedro, we left in groups of five on board ship. Because we went aboard ship one night about 10:00 and we were assigned our bunks and we went to bed. And the next morning when I woke up I detected the motion of the ship. So I got up and went on deck, and I looked around and I didn't see land any place. I said to one of the sailors, I said how far are we from the nearest land, he said about two miles. And I left and I said, which way. He said straight down, we were completely out of sight of land. I remember that, we had a big laugh about it. But we rode, I don't even know how long we rode. I don't know whether we came back to Frisco or whether we went we landed in Seattle, Washington. We were stationed in Seattle, Washington for a while. And we had no duties there. We used to stand, minor duties we had was guard duty. And then in July of '46, we were shipped back to New York State for discharge.
- Allen: When you had the meeting with Admiral Wright, and you said that you wouldn't go back under the conditions that existed there, did you mean the base as a whole or in particular on the pier of what—?
- Small: The working conditions. The conditions under which we handled the ammunition. Because I had told everybody in authority that I could get to, that we were working dangerously. And one day that place would blow up. Lieutenant Delucchi gave me a manual that contained a diagram of a 500-pound bomb that was supposed to be totally harmless with the detonator in it. We had a discussion about it. I said,

“Won’t concussion blow this thing up?” It’s impossible. It cannot blow up with this charge in the head of it. And I didn’t believe it. Every time we got in an argument over it, it wound up him telling me if it does blow up you won’t know anything about it. Like I said, we were the first Blacks in the Navy other than at the rank of stewards. And I was the first Black seaman that a whole lot of those white fellows had ever saw. I had a lot of conflict over that. They expected me to be a stewards mate. And when they found out that I was a seaman, then they rejected me. I was on one small ship, ‘cause when I left Frisco and went to Seattle, Washington, I was on board of a ship and we had a young shave tailed it. From Massachusetts-- who was the Captain of the ship and he made me the, I forget what the name was now, but I would stand on the fantail with earphones on, and received the orders from the bridge, and then repeat the orders for the crew. And when we were casting off, he would say, “Cast off one” and I’d say, “CAST OFF ONE!” And these white boys were pulling on this big red line, and I was standing up there giving them orders, see what I mean. And it caused quite a commotion.

To the extent that there was a bosuns mate there, and he was from Alabama—big redhead fellow, and first day I went down to the mess hall to eat, I used to eat with the stewards, and they would get their tray and the officer’s trays and go upstairs. So this lieutenant told me, said, “Small, you eat downstairs with the crew.” So I said, “Look, they’ll be trouble if I eat down there.” “You eat down there, and I’ll take care of the trouble.” Sure enough, the first day I walk in the mess hall and sat down to eat, this big southerner sat down opposite me and he said, “By gawd, this is the first time I ever ate with a nigger.” And I had a mug of coffee, a Navy mug with no handles, and I dashed the coffee in his face, and then hit him with the mug. And before he could get straightened out, I was across the table on him. I was weighing at that time about 155 pounds and he weighed about 240, but I was too fast for him to hit me. But I was also too light to hit him. I would hit him, but I couldn’t hurt him. He’d swing at me, and he couldn’t hit me. So finally, the lieutenant came in and he broke it up; and he talked to us and we shook hands and we became the best of friends— everywhere I went he was with me.

We would go in a bar, and he’d say, “Give me two beers.” They set one beer up, he’d slide me the beer, and he’d say, “Now give me a beer.” They’d say, “We don’t serve blacks in here.” Didn’t call them Blacks then, called them niggers. “We don’t serve niggers in here, we don’t serve coloreds in here.” And we’d tear the bar up. We’d turn over tables and everything. He became my best friend after we had this fight. And I just asked him, I said, “Alex, why you like me so?” He say, “Small, you’re a man. I found out something—I used to think all black people carried knives and guns and razors and everything, and I

kept expecting you to pull out a razor, but you fought me with your fist. You knew you had no chance to win, but still you fought me with your fist, I got respect for you, I like you. You're my buddy." See, but none of this was ever publicized. I think this was after the trial anyway, 'cause the first ship I got was after the trial. After, we came back to Frisco and then they shipped me to Vancouver, Washington.

Allen: Do you have contact with any of the guys, do you know where any of them are?

Small: No, I don't know where any of them are. Tried to get in contact with them.

Allen: Yeah, 'cause I've been trying to locate them. So far I found five, that's all I've located so far: yourself, Cy Sheppard, Edward Waldrop.

Small: Waldrop, yeah, he was a big light skinned fellow. He was from North Carolina. Oh my goodness, I knew Waldrop good.

Allen: He lives in Washington now. In fact, that's where I'm going next to talk to him. And then Julius Dixon who lives in Charleston. And Jack Crittenden.

Small: Yes, I remember him. He's in Montgomery.

Allen: Yeah, I'm going to see all of them.

Small: Well listen, if you see those boys, get their address and send it to me.

Allen: I got it. Well, let me ask you this. Crittenden was the one who raised this to me, that's why I was going to raise it to you. He asked me for the other men's addresses that I had located. I said, "Well I'll ask when I talk to folks, if that's cool." But I didn't want to be giving out addresses without permission. So if it's okay with you—

Small: Yeah! Give them my address.

Allen: I'll give you theirs once I talk to them. Make sure it's okay with them. I'll send you their addresses too.

Small: I'd appreciate that. 'Cause I'd like to write the fellas a letter. Find out how they are doing, maybe we might meet and hash over old times.

Allen: That'd be great.

Small: I thought one time about a reunion, but I said well that wouldn't make sense, 'cause we had a lot of trouble. A reunion of the Port Chicago men—I don't know that would make any sense. So I dropped it.

Allen: I'll just go with what I've got to now, after transcribing it, if I have any questions I'll write to you, etc. etc.

Interview 2: June 3, 1978

Small: There were at least seven or eight ammunition bunkers between the barracks and the pier where the ships were docked. And I was looking at the end of these barracks here; that explosion came over those bunkers. It was at least a quarter of a mile away, where the explosion was, from the explosion to these barracks. I was just looking at the ends of these barracks and how it demolished them and knocked all the windows out. I don't see any of the ammunition bunkers.

Allen: You're right about them 'cause I remember on the map I had, which unfortunately I didn't bring, but it shows the ammunition bunkers which are between the pier and the barracks.

Small: And the base itself. I never got a chance to see any of this because immediately after the explosion they shipped us all away, and we went to Vallejo, California, Vallejo Naval Air Base, that's where we were barracked then, or billeted-out there. And from there we went to Treasure Island: Yerba Buena Island was the other name for it, and that's where we were stationed, 'til after the trial; after the trial we went to San Diego, California.

Allen: One of the things I wanted to ask about was in the NAACP files. I found a letter that had been written by the men from Port Chicago in 1943 that they had sent to a lawyer in Berkeley and he had turned it over to the NAACP. In form it was actually a petition in which the men listed a number of grievances that they had about and complaints they had about conditions at Port Chicago. Some of the things we talked about before, as a matter of fact. In which they said they were asking for a change in policy in the Navy's practices, including changing the rating system and so they'd get a chance to get other ratings. There was no names on the copy of the petition that I saw. I guess they had all been deleted or something. For whatever reason. That was in 1943. Do you remember anything at all about—?

Small: No. See, I didn't go into the Service until 1943, in July, and it was in September of '43 before I got to Port Chicago. See? And I heard about—I heard rumors about this petition that had gone out, but it was prior to my arriving there, and I had nothing to do with it.

Allen: But you had heard about it.

Small: I had heard about it.

Allen: What was the talk about it? Can you recall anything?

Small: Well, it was mostly scuttlebutt: “things are gonna change around here, you know, we’re taking care of it,” but there was never any definite statements made as to who signed the petition or who sent it out, you know. But I did find out that a petition had—or a letter, it wasn’t referred to as a petition it was called a letter—had been sent to somebody that was going to do something about conditions on the base. Because at that time everything above seaman first class, no: petty officer third class, was white. See? There was no promotions coming and no changes; there were no black officers on the base or anything, you know, and the highest ranking black on the base was petty officer third class. They were in charge of a division; they were division commanders, I guess they call them. There was no petty officer first or second and the next are the lieutenant: everything lieutenant and above was white. See what I mean? All of the guards, all of the SPs [Shore Patrol] that were Marines—they were white. I mean, there were no black guards on the base and this is a situation that I assume we all wanted to change it, but I imagine somebody before I got there had taken some steps to change it. But I wasn’t there long enough to get into the heart of the racial situation. I was promoted to seaman first class because of my ability to handle men, but I was told by my lieutenant, my division commander, that I was too young to be a petty officer, even though I had the ability. I was too young. And so I remained a seaman first class though I performed the duties of a petty officer.

Allen: Had you worked with handling men before you went into the Service? In a Union, or anything of that sort?

Small: Well, yes, in the CC [Civilian Conservation] Camp. I was lieutenant in the CC Camp, that’s what they called us, lieutenant, but we were just squad leader. See what I mean. But I had the rank of lieutenant and I had a crew of men under me. And that’s where I got my training at in handling men. So when I went in the Navy I had some training behind me.

Allen: I see, I see. But you weren’t in a Union. You were a truck driver before you went in the Service, right?

Small: That was my civilian occupation, truck driver. In CC Camp, I went in in ’39 and I came out in ’41, and there I was a woodsman. We built roads and constructed bridges, dams, spillways, things like that in Lebanon State Forest in New Jersey, see. For the Civil Conservation Corps. CCC.

Allen: Yeah, my father was in that in Georgia. He told me about it several times.

Small: So that’s where I got my training in handling men, so when I went in the Navy it came natural. You know what I mean? I mean I had a natural way with men. And I got along with them much better than the petty officers that we had. In fact, the night of the explosion I was the one that took care

of most of the men. I got a scratch, but I didn't get hurt; there were some men that were badly hurt. And I tended to their wounds as best I could, and gave one my shoes, things like that to help them out. And the petty officers after the explosion, we never found them. I don't know what happened to them. But that's the way it was. I called cadence to the men, I marched outside the ranks and I was the one that got them out of bed in the morning, when they had a problem I was the one they came to with it. That was one of the main reasons why I was considered leader of the fifty mutineers. Though we had petty officers over us, the men came to me, rather than go to them. So when it came down to the question of refusing to go to work, then the whole weight fell on me. As their chosen leader the whole thing fell on me. You'll find that the refusal to go to work—they asked me if I was going to work and I said no, and somebody over in the ranks said, "Well, if Small don't go, we're not going, either." That put me right in the front of it. I still don't know who said it, but somebody said it in the ranks, and that put me as a spokesman for the whole group, the whole bunch.

- Allen: Officers and the petty officers recognized that the men looked up to you. Well, as you say, spokesman. Even though you didn't have the rank.
- Small: That was their [the men's] choice, see. They made the choice themselves and I performed in that capacity as best as I could; 'course, it was prestige for me, too. You know what I men. There wasn't any monetary value in it, but I enjoyed the men coming to me rather than going to the petty officer. It just went along but in the end it proved almost my downfall because they shoved me right out in front of the gun, see? I had no alternative but to accept it.
- Allen: Do you remember—I think two of the petty officers, one was named Boyer and one was named Woods?
- Small: I don't remember their names. Their names sounds familiar, but I don't remember if they were petty officers at the time of the explosion. I know we had two petty officers, two black petty officers, but I don't remember their names. But reading back through this my memory will probably come back to a lot of it. The names are familiar, but I can't tie them in with the petty officers. In fact, I didn't know them that well anyhow because they had their private rooms, see what I mean, separate from the crew. They had their own private rooms and they came and went through an entrance that we knew nothing about; I mean, we had no access to it. They could come and go without our knowing it. See what I mean?
- Allen: They were in the barracks?

- Small: They were in the barracks, but they had private rooms in the barracks. Where we were in a ward like, bunk beds two deep, two beds high, they were in private rooms. They had a private room.
- Allen: Yeah. Okay, okay. There was one other thing I found out too, that happened long before the explosion that again showed that there were problems there. This was before you got there, too, but I was wondering if maybe people had been talking about it when you got there. And that was that in the Christmas 1942 or '43, I think it was 1942, over in Vallejo there was a riot. Because there was no real recreational facilities for the black sailors, and apparently there was some conflict between black and white sailors, and it developed into a so-called full scale riot.
- Small: I remember that. I think that spread; that spread from Vallejo into another town, what was the name—I heard of it and talk of it, but we were restricted to certain streets in certain towns. See, for instance, Pittsburg, California: that's the home of Camp Stoneman, which was an Army camp. And we had one street in the town that we could go on, which was Black Diamond Street, about five blocks long. From Black Diamond Street we had a prescribed route to the bus station if we were travelling the bus, and any other streets we were found on we were accosted, you know, and had to answer questions as to why we weren't where we were supposed to be. See what I mean? And we had quite a bit of conflict over that, because when we got off the bus we had a route we traveled to Black Diamond Street and we stayed on Black Diamond Street until we caught the Navy van back to the base, or walked back to the bus station to catch a bus to Port Chicago. See? And I never did much travelling around Vallejo—my main traveling was in Pittsburgh or Oakland or Frisco. This is where we went for our liberties. Mostly to Oakland and Frisco. This is where we went for our liberties. Mostly to Oakland or Frisco because there we had a greater range than we had in smaller towns around.
- Allen: Yeah, yeah. Where was Camp Shoemaker? Was that nearby, or—?
- Small: Now Camp Shoemaker was in Oakland. Camp Shoemaker was on Seventh Street in Oakland, if I make no mistake. There was a Navy base on Seventh Street in Oakland. That was Camp Shoemaker, I'm quite sure it was.
- Allen: Okay, because in August after the work stoppage you were taken to—that's where you were taken, right?
- Small: To Shoemaker, right. That was on Seventh Street in Oakland, if my memory serves me right. I said we were taken to Vallejo, but I was wrong. It was Seventh Street in Oakland. Camp Shoemaker.

- Allen: That was after the work stoppage. Before the work stoppage you were at, let me see, after the explosion—yeah, according to the testimony you did go to Vallejo.
- Small: We were on a barge. We were billeted on a barge, and I believe that barge was at Vallejo.
- Allen: Yeah, right.
- Small: That barge was at Vallejo; we were billeted on a barge, packed on there like sardines; in fact, that's where most of the testimony during the trial was around our imprisonment on the barge, and what happened, and things that were said, and things on that barge. We had to march from the barge up a pier to a mess hall for our meals, and there was quite a bit of conflict during those marches with the SPs that were in charge of us. You know what I mean? They had, I guess you'd call them, spies on the barge that reported to or related conversations that went on between us on the barge. It all came out during the trial. And things that I said in trying to handle the men or keep them quiet or put down an impending riot or something like that was used as testimony against me during the trial. You see what I mean?
- Allen: That's there, right.
- Small: And no one knows how this testimony got off the barge, 'cause it was—well, I called a meeting one night and some of the phrases I used during the meeting was damaging to me during the trial, but the reasoning or the cause of what I was trying to achieve by these phrases was twisted all around. See what I mean? Of course, I didn't expect that any of this testimony would be used against me, so I wasn't cautious of what I was saying. I talked in the language that I was familiar with and used the words that I was accustomed to.
- Allen: Yep, that was it. They, never having heard—the famous statement.
- Small: Yeah, now that was misconstrued and it was very damaging during the testimony, see. But there wasn't very much I could do about it. We had five lawyers, and I don't think you could have taken them and mixed them up and gotten a good one out of them. But I think they did their best, their best, see what I mean?
- Allen: Did you meet with them before the trial?
- Small: Yes, I met them, and talked with them, and they planned the defense, but when they put me on the stand in my own defense, then I had to answer questions that the prosecution put to me, see what I mean? And as

truthfully as I could remember them, 'cause there was a whole lot accounted to me that I didn't remember saying, but then in the course of the thing I don't know if I said it or not. I couldn't definitely say that I didn't say it.

Allen: One of the things I wanted to ask you about: I remembered that when we talked before you'd told me a little bit about the barge meeting and the—particularly some of the problems with some of the statements there, and I wanted to—clarify that and some of the stuff that's in here. Let me see. Here he says: "What did you say at the meeting?" Look at that paragraph there. This is on page 374 in the trial transcript.

Small: I don't know. The most damaging statement I made was when I was putting out about—

Allen: Okay, now that's what I want to ask you about. Here's where he asks you about that.

Small: "Did you make the statement attributed to you by other witnesses at that meeting—?" That we have the officers by their balls?

[Pause]

Allen: But this one here, this is the one that, in fact, you made. Right?

Small: Yes.

Allen: This question number one twenty-two here?

Small: Yes. I made that statement. But, see, my defense attorney told me to deny that I made that statement. Because that was the most damaging statement that was in the whole thing, but I remember that it did come out eventually that I admitted that I made it. And tried to bring out the—how shall I say it—the reasoning that I had in making that. See what I mean? I assumed, and I still think it's good procedure, if you can convince a man that he has no reason to fight than he won't fight. Do you see what I mean? And by telling them that we were in a position where we didn't have to fight, if we just played it cool everything would be all right. See what I mean? And I stuck that statement in there. See? To convince them that we're in the driver's seat, see what I mean? And their—

Allen: "Them" meaning the rest of the men. Yeah. Okay.

Small: Right. Instead of saying, "Look, fellas, we're driving this bus and it'll go where we want it to go," instead of saying that, I said, "Well, we so-and-

so-and-so,” meaning that we’re in the position where they can’t touch us if we play it cool. See what I mean? But then, again, that was all twisted up.

Allen: Okay, well, I wanted to clear that up because I remembered when we talked before you had said that that was, you had made that statement and I was just not sure how to take it here.

Small: I did make that statement. I was advised by the defense attorney not to admit that I made it.

Allen: Well, what was the defense strategy then?

Small: I think that they tried to show me as a dedicated Navy man. You see what I mean? And the rest of them as inexperienced boys. And me trying to control them in the best way that I knew how. But they admitted that we were going to get some time, because it’s a written law that you don’t get away with nothing with the Navy. I mean, if the Navy takes you to trial they have you in jail already. See what I mean? And regardless of your defense, you can expect to be found guilty. But they tried to ease it up as much as they could and show me in a martyr’s light I guess you’d call it. You know, rather than just admit that, give up and say, “Well he’s one of the bunch.” His name was Admiral Dowes? The head of the Eleventh Naval District at that time.

Allen: Wright. Admiral Wright, I think it was.

Small: Wright. I forget it, sounds like Downes or Wright or something like that. Anyway, I had a personal meeting with him, and he riled me. He told me, “If you don’t go back to duty I’m gonna have you shot.” And I told him, “You bald head so-and-so, go ahead and shoot me.” See what I mean? But I regretted having said it after I said it. But I had said it, you know. This never came out in the trial, never came out in the trial at all. But had he not threatened me, what they expected me to do was to just go back to duty, you know, and forget everything. And they assumed that if I went back to duty everybody would follow me.

Allen: Right.

Small: But I had what I considered a legitimate reason for not going back to work. The danger in working, because I had went over numerous times with Lieutenant [Ernest] Delucchi that there was danger of explosion there. And his answer was, “If it explodes you won’t know nothing about it. So go ahead and work.” But as it happens, when it did explode, I did know something about it. And I refused to go back to that same situation that we were in. I mean, rolling bombs down a ramp, bouncing them off the side of a ship, but they claimed that concussion couldn’t set off that

ammunition—that it had to have a detonator. I don't know what caused the initial explosion, but that ammunition, that so-called innocent ammunition, is what did most of the damage. You see what I mean?

Allen: Right.

Small: So maybe concussion set it off, or something; I don't know what set it off. But they assured me that it couldn't happen. "It's impossible." It couldn't happen. We handled no detonators, we handled no caps, or anything; we only handled the charged cylinders. And without that detonator and the cap in it, it was supposed to be innocent. It couldn't explode. Then when it did explode it turned out to be an ugly thing, see.

Allen: Right. Was that something that was generally discussed among the men, at all?

Small: Oh, yes! We were all very concerned about that, and we were all afraid of an explosion. But there was very little that you could do about it. I mean, you had a day's work to do. You know what I mean? And the object, more important than doing a day's work was beating the other divisions—putting on more ammunition in your shift period than the other division did.

Allen: Oh. How was that so important?

Small: It was a contest between the division leaders. And they used to bet that their division would put on more than the other division.

Allen: Who?

Small: The lieutenants. The lieutenants used to bet among themselves. And any time we were slack or slowed up or there was a halt in the flow of the ammunition from boxcar to ship, there was a big stink come up about it because that shortened up the tonnage we would get in that particular day. And the rushing and the carelessness is what I thought would cause an explosion. Now I don't know what caused the explosion 'cause I wasn't there. But I expected it momentarily. We had big cable nets, and we used to roll five bombs onto a net just so it was fifty-one percent in the net. And they'd hook up the four corners of it, and pick it up. And then the bombs would blum, blum, blum, run together in the net. See what I mean? And they would roll them down from the boxcars, down a ramp, and they had a mat on the side of the ship that these bombs were supposed to hit but if they missed the mat they hit the ship. See, the metal ship, you know? And ricocheted back onto the dock and somebody threw a two-by-four under it to stop it. So I was expected this explosion any time. I mean, I was never convinced by Lieutenant Delucchi that an explosion wasn't possible.

Allen: One of the things in the testimony there that was asked, page 395 towards the end it mentioned some meetings that were held or discussions that were had about the Bluejackets. Here it is. It says question 461: "Didn't you tell them you read the Bluejacket's Manual about mutiny, and what they had done was not mutiny?" "No, sir." "Did you ever have a discussion on whether or not—" Okay, and then it says, "Prior to the explosion we used to get together at times and read the Bluejacket's Manual and discuss it" And then it goes on to say, "What did you discuss?" "Most anything we would run across: ships, mutiny, things like that. How we could be punished, we talked about it."

Small: Well, that was common among the men. I don't remember these actual questions, but it was common among the men to discuss the Bluejacket's Manual. That was our bible. We would take the Bluejacket's Manual and run references back, previous happenings or what we used to get out of the—what was that paper that came out—it was a military paper. Oh, I can't think of the name of it now; it was a military paper that was distributed by the Army.

Allen: *Stars and Stripes?*

Small: It wasn't *Stars and Stripes*, it was another—Maybe I'll think of the name of it. That used to come to us, I think, once a month, and we would read different cases, you know, that things had happened. And we would discuss it through the Bluejacket's Manual, whether the Bluejacket's Manual backed this up, or whether the Bluejacket's Manual explained what was the punishment for such a crime, like AWOL, you know what I mean. One of the big issues there, 'cause we had a queer in our outfit and we were very concerned about what would happen to him if he was exposed. I don't think the officers knew about him. And he did everything he could to get out of the Navy legitimately, and we used to laugh at him; it was a big thing among the boys. Is he going to make it, what's he going to do next? You know what I mean? He failed in this, and what's he gonna try next, you know, and how does the Bluejacket's Manual talk about a section eight discharge? And what do you have to do or be caught doing, you know, to get discharged, and naturally mutiny was one of the major crimes and that came up—What is mutiny? You know what I mean. And to what extent do you have to take over a ship to be called a mutineer? As far as we were concerned mutiny could only be committed on the high seas. And we weren't on the high seas, so we couldn't commit mutiny. I, for one, didn't consider refusing to go to work mutiny. We didn't try to take over anything; I mean, we didn't try to take command of the base, we didn't try to replace any officers, we didn't try to assume an officer's position. How could they call it mutiny? You see what I mean? But they did call it mutiny! And said, "You are charged with mutiny, the United

States then being in a state of war.” See. I could never understand how they could call it mutiny; I never tried to assume any officer’s position or job or pull any officer out of his position, take over his job or anything, so. We never figured how it could be mutiny. And we discussed it, we talked about it. Yes.

Allen: So this is actually even before the explosion.

Small: Before the explosion we talked about mutiny, about the Bluejacket’s Manual and everything in it. They used to have a great thing about your reciting your orders of the day, when you were on a post. You know what I mean? You were standing guard duty, and an officer would walk up to you and he says, “Recite section eight, paragraph two. In the Bluejacket’s Manual.” You know, and I don’t know if that’s the right section, the right paragraph, but it went something like this: I shall stand my guard at all costs and defend my station against all comers. I shall challenge anyone that approaches my station within earshot or visual shot. You see, it went something like that. And they expected you to recite this verbatim, word for word, see what I mean. And if you couldn’t, then you were punished—you were put on KP [kitchen patrol] or you were denied liberty or something like that. See what I mean? And we often got together and versed each other on the Bluejacket’s Manual.

Allen: I see. That makes a lot of sense.

Small: Yeah, I’d ask a fella, “Hey, what’s section B, paragraph two?” “So, so, so, so, so.” “Oh, man, you got it wrong.” We’d go get the book and in few minutes we’d have a whole crowd around us; everybody trying to do the same thing, you know, because it was important to us to know that. ‘Cause they’d walk up to you at any time and ask you to recite something, and you were supposed to know it.

Allen: One of the things I think you mentioned last time, too, was that when you went to Vallejo after the explosion but before they had ordered you to go back to work that some of the fellas, or, were circulating a list or a petition.

Small: Yes.

Allen: That was to the effect that the men—well, I forget now exactly what it said—

Small: Yes. We refused—I think it said, “We refused to go back to work.” I remember the petition because I refused to sign it. But they asked me verbally, was I going back to work? And I told them, “As for me, no. I’m not going. But that has nothing to do with you.” See what I mean. And I wouldn’t sign the petition. But it all came out the same way. The morning

that they marched us toward the docks in the drill field, we approached an intersecting street, and the street we were on was a dead end at the street. We had to turn right or left. And left meant you were headed for the docks, the work area. Right, meant you were headed for the drill field, see. And I was marching on the left-hand side of the ranks, dead, boom. Just like that. He said, "Forward march—column left!" nobody moved. So he got up on a platform, an elevated speaker's platform, and he said, "Small, front and center." I walked up and crossed to the front, made a left, stopped in front of him. He said, "I'm going to give you a direct order—I'm going to give you a direct order to go back to work. Will you obey that order?" And I told him, "No, sir." And somebody over in the ranks said, "If Small don't go, we're not going, either." See what I mean? And he said, "Is that final?" And I said, "Yes, sir, that's final." But I was talking about myself. You see what I mean. Well, that put me in the forefront of everything. Made me responsible for the whole 250 men, see what I mean. And only this one man spoke out of the ranks, and I think it was [Edward] Waldrop but I'm not sure. I couldn't be positive who it was; and there was another fella there named Weideman, and he was a mouthy one, too. He was a practical joker. I think it was Waldrop but it could have been anyone. I don't know who it was. But anyhow, that made me the head of the whole situation. So around me they picked forty-nine other men, and charged us; gave us a general court martial. Now, what happened to the other 200 men I don't know. I heard some of them was discharged, dishonorable discharge, some of them went back to duty, some of them was shipped out at various duty, pending return to duty. I don't know what happened to them, but the fifty of us that was selected out of the 250, we went on to trial.

Allen: Yeah. You say they picked them out or selected them. How was that done?

Small: Well, the ones that were most—stood up for themselves. I mean, when they talked with me, if I was belligerent, then I was one of the head leaders. See what I mean. And they'd talk with another fella and he was cowardly: "I'm afraid of the ammunition," you know; things like this. This is what I got, anyhow. And he was put in a category. Another come in and said, "Nah, I'm not going back." Said, "Why?" "I just don't want to go." Said, "Well, you'll go to jail." "I don't care. Send me to jail." He was put in a separate category as one of the leaders, one of the instigators. That's the way they picked the fifty men—the fifty that they picked were the fifty most manly acting men in the division. Out of the 200 that were dispersed in other directions were, what I'll call adolescent. They were more adolescent, we were the men out of the division. The fifty that they picked, we were the men.

Allen: Getting back to the matter of that list or whatever, I remember you said you thought that was a bad idea, and that you may even have destroyed it.

Why did you decide it was a bad idea? To have that list or petition, or whatever it was?

Small: Well, I knew—I guess mostly from instinct—that anything in writing is more damaging to you than a verbal conversation. And when you put your name on a list, then you become a supporting part of whatever that list stands for. And there's very little change of your changing your mind, even if you wanted to. You see what I mean?

Allen: Right.

Small: And I knew that once I signed that list, if I did change my mind or some reason came up that would make me want to change my mind, my name on that petition would always be damaging. And I've never been one to sign petitions unless it was what I considered a very good cause that I didn't have any idea I would renege on. But anything that was shady or I thought would be damaging to me in the future I never put my name on. And just more instinct, I guess, than knowledge caused me to refuse to put my name on that list.

Allen: Alright. That's what I thought was probably the case but wanted to ask you about it to clear it up.

Small: Well, I tried to get them to not make that list up because once you put your name on something like that, you are a part of it. Regardless of what change of mind you've had or how your thinking has changed, you are a part of that mob. If your name is on that list you're a part of it.

Allen: So at that time you were still thinking of possible options in terms of what you might do.

Small: Oh, yeah, I was never convinced that I would go back to work. But I wouldn't go back to work under the conditions in which we worked. See what I mean? And I told the lieutenant that I was afraid. And he said, "A grown man like you, afraid?" I said, "Yes, I'm afraid." Now I wasn't so afraid that I was a nervous wreck; you follow me?

Allen: Mm-hmm.

Small: But I did have sense enough to know that the same thing could happen again. And the only recourse I had was to not get in it, and therefore, I refused to go back to work. Now, I thought I might come out with a dishonorable discharge or be transferred to another base, or even shipped out. And all of those were better alternatives than going back on that dock, under the conditions in which we worked. I was never what you might say, actually afraid to go back there, but under the conditions that we did work

I was afraid that the same thing might happen again. You see what I mean? And so therefore I chose not to go back. That's all.

Allen: When you were on the barge and there was about 250 men on the barge there—well, first of all, was that only one barge or were there a string of barges?

Small: No, it was one barge.

Allen: One barge.

Small: No it was one barge, I think it was three decks high, I believe, if I remember correctly. I know it was two decks high, I think it was three decks high. And it was 250 of us on that barge, that one barge.

Allen: Yeah, I you mentioned before I think you said it was not designed to house 250 men.

Small: No, it wasn't. I don't remember now how—I think we were three deep, three bunks high on that barge, and there was about a foot between each—the bunks were lined up, end to end, and there was about a foot between each tier of bunks. And I think it was five bunks wide.

Allen: Did everybody have a bunk?

Small: Everybody had a bunk, everybody had a bed, yes. But we were so crowded until you had to get out of the bunk one at a time. If a fella got out of the bunk, well, you couldn't pass a man in the aisle, the aisle was so narrow. The fella in the aisle had to go out to the end before the one behind him could come out. See.

Allen: And when you were put on the barge Delucchi, he spoke to you, and asked you to what, keep order on the barge? Do you remember that?

Small: I don't remember him ever asking me ever to keep order on the barge. No. I was never appointed. I don't remember it.

Allen: well, he didn't appoint, well, maybe it's in the—it's in here someplace, let me read it over. You mentioned that he asked you to keep order and there was a big debate about whether you were officially appointed a petty officer or not. That never happened, apparently, but—

Small: No, like I say, I was never appointed an officer or given command. Only just through the choice of the men themselves. See, and—now, I'm trying to think. Maybe he did ask me to keep order on the barge, I don't remember. I don't even remember the testimony relating to that question.

Allen: Okay. Well, anyhow, what I wanted to ask you about is that on the barge itself, what was the state of feeling among the men—were there different viewpoints?

Small: There was a general state of rebellion. That was why I called the meeting, in the first place. In fact, several of the men asked me to call the meeting. Now this was the men on the barge, see what I mean? They asked me to speak to the men, because one fella, one sailor, SP, had been knifed on the way to chow, and then after that they searched the barge and they found a half a bushel of knives and weapons and things, see what I mean, that fellas had concealed on the barge; and after they confiscated all of the knives and things, then there was a scramble to replenish them. You know, to rearm themselves. And it was after this sailor was knifed that they threatened to bring in the Marines.

Allen: Now were the SPs black, or white, or what?

Small: All white, all white. They were Navy, but they were all white. Now the Marines, they were Shore Patrol, but they were Marines—they were in Khaki. See what I mean, they were all white also. But this particular time on the barge we had Navy SPs, which were, well they ranked from—

[interruption]

Small: They ranked, if I remember correctly, from Seaman First Class to Petty Officer First Class, and after one got cut, got stabbed, they threatened to bring in the Marines. And I knew that the Marines were much tougher than the sailors. And I mentioned that during that meeting, but I was asked by the men to see if I couldn't quiet the men down and see if I couldn't get some order among them.

Allen: You mentioned also a white officer. A Marine officer had spoken to you. Do you recall that—that was in our last interview. You said that after the incident had occurred—you were sure he was a Marine officer, but you weren't sure about—

Small: Well, I identified him by his uniform. But as for his personal identification, I didn't know who he was. I remember that now.

Allen: This was after the guard was stabbed.

Small: Yes. After the Shore Patrol was stabbed. And they threatened to bring in the Marines.

- Allen: So when you called a meeting then, on the one hand you had—okay, the guys were afraid of being shot, right?
- Small: Yes.
- Allen: They'd been threatened they were gonna shoot, Marine or Shore Patrol were armed and they were gonna shoot the men.
- Small: Mm-hmm.
- Allen: And the men, some of them were arming themselves.
- Small: Yeah. They were arming themselves with knives and homemade knives, and spoons that were turned into knives, things like that. In fact, they had just confiscated half a bushel of them, and they were rearming themselves. In fact, when we went to the mess hall, a man was issued a knife, fork, and spoon at the door, and he surrendered a knife, fork, and spoon on his way out or he didn't get out. I mean, they were that cautious about us taking tools or utensils out of the mess hall. See what I mean? And it was a pretty hairy situation and I got into it to try to offset a disaster that I saw coming. Which I should never have done. I should have let them go on and shoot up everybody they wanted to, and maybe I wouldn't have gotten in so deep.
- Allen: Well, the disaster that you saw coming though was some of the men—
- Small: Some of the men getting shot or some of the Marines getting hurt, because the way it was on that barge, if a Marine had come on there and men decided to do something to him there was no escape for him. I mean, they would have killed him, he couldn't have gotten out. By the same token, if they started shooting on that barge there's no way possible to hit any one particular man. See what I mean? Because we were too packed on there. And there was no way for us to get off that barge, except through one exit off that barge, and that was at best double-file. At best it was double-file, see. So, it was in my interest, being one of them imprisoned on the barge, it was my interest to offset any violence that might occur on the barge. And I thought about calling a meeting and talking to the men, I was in their confidence. At least, I thought I was, that I could quell their anger a little. Cool them down. See this is what I was attempting to do. But we had a spy on the barge—that I hadn't anticipated. See what I mean. And he went back to the head men with what he considered pertinent information; some of it was right, some of it was wrong, some of it was twisted, some of it was built up—I don't think any of it was deleted. But this all came out in the trial.

- Allen: Yeah, yeah. Well, when you called the meeting, then, okay, so there was at least some of the men who were kind of like hotheads or whatever you want to call them, who were ready to fight.
- Small: The majority of them were. There were very few cool heads on the barge. But those few who were cool heads were the ones that asked me to call the meeting. See what I mean?
- Allen: Okay, at the trial there was some testimony about some of the men, once they got on the barge, and had been there for a day or two, began reconsidering. And wanted to go back to work. Did you have any contact with them, or know anything about them?
- Small: Yes, there was a few—that wanted to go back to work. I remember them. One was a little fella, little small man; young, about seventeen years old. And he wanted to go back to work, and he asked me, could he leave the barge to go back to work. And I told him, “You can, but I wouldn’t advise it.” And I advised him at that time to stay with the men and we’d all see this through together. If we go back as a unit then that’s one thing. But if we go back one at a time, the one that goes back will bear the brunt of the whole bunch, because they’ll look down on him as a traitor and as a deserter. See what I mean? And I said, “Now, I advise you to stay with us, because if you leave and go back on your own you’ll be considered a traitor.” And so he changed his mind and didn’t go.
- Allen: He’ll be considered a traitor and a deserter by the other men?
- Small: By the other men. See what I mean? And if they met him on the beach, on liberty or somewhere, there’s no telling what they might do to him. So it was in his own interest and for his own safety that I advised him not to pull off from the whole bunch. I mean, he had nothing to gain from it, other than just getting off that barge. I don’t know; they didn’t offer us anything monetarily to return to duty, in fact, they threatened me with death if I didn’t, and that’s the only offer I had made to me. And I turned that down. What offers they may have made to the other men I don’t know.
- Allen: While you were on the barge there was no negotiation with the officers or anything like that, huh?
- Small: You mean, concerning returning to duty?
- Allen: Yeah, or the conditions under which the men would be willing to return to work.
- Small: Not that I know of. No one approached us with an offer. To return to work. Not that I can remember. The first knowledge we had of returning to work

was that morning when we were marched out to the drill field. And after that there was no offers made to return to work, and no discussion about returning to work.

Allen: Okay. So the belief among the men, then, was that if you stick together, that is, the whole 250, and stick together in not going back to work, that they would have to either transfer you to another base, or some other duty, or—

Small: Improve working conditions, this is what I, personally, was after. Improvement of working conditions. And desegregation of the base. This is what I was after. I don't know what the other men were after. But in my mind, I felt certain that if we held out as a group with the public sentiment that was behind us, we could get the base desegregated and we could get the base brought up to a modern base, because it had been rumored that, even before the explosion, 250 thousand dollars had been appropriated for the modernization of that base. And we could never find out what was being done or when it would be done, or anything concerning—even paving the streets. Follow me?

Allen: Yeah.

Small: Then when the explosion happened, this was an opportunity to force the Navy to do what they had already appropriated money to do. See what I mean? And I was a winch operator on the ship, and I missed killing a man on the average of once a day. Killing or dangerously injuring a man, permanently. And it was all because of rushing. Speed. And I didn't want to go back into this. This was my reason for refusing to go back to work. To get the working conditions changed. I realized that I had to work. I wasn't trying to shirk work. I don't think these other men were trying to shirk work. But to go back to work under the same conditions, with no improvements, no changes, the same group of officers that we had, was just—we thought there was a better alternative, that's all.

Allen: Yeah, well, how did you make that known to the officers, or whoever? That is how you felt about it?

Small: The only officer I had contact with was my division commander, and that was Lieutenant Delucchi. And I talked with him every day, practically. And on several occasions it came up, the explosion, came up. But he always said, "Small, if it blows up you won't know nothing about it, so don't worry about it." That was the way he took it.

Allen: Yeah, so he didn't respond at all to the grievance.

- Small: No, he had no logical answer, or no answer that would be satisfying. You know what I mean? He just brushed it off. It was our job to load the ammunition. And that was it.
- Allen: Okay, so in the meeting itself, then. Coming back to that, your feeling was that if you could stick together, hold out, the whole 250 men, that they would have to change the conditions. Or, at the worst, they might ship you out; people might be jailed for a while, and then shipped out.
- Small: Let me tell you something else that happened now. This is my own personal experience. When I was, before this imprisonment, I think we were at Camp Shoemaker. Charles Wideman—he was a practical joker—we had big Honeywell oil heaters, with the fan behind them, space heaters. He came in one night, oh, I guess about 1:30-2:00 in the morning; there was an ironing board next to the space heater, and there was newspaper up on the ironing board that the men used to press their uniforms, we pressed them between newspapers. And he took a piece of newspaper and deliberately stuck it in the fan behind that heater, and it made a “RRR!” noise. And there was a spontaneous explosion toward that back door: they took the back door right off the hinges. See what I mean? And he was standing up in the floor, laughing. Well, I’ve always been a God-fearing man, and I had a dream that night. I called up and demanded that Wideman be taken out of the barracks. And they removed him that night—the Shore Patrol came and got him that night, I don’t know where they took him, but they moved him out of that barracks. And I had a dream that night. And in that dream I was told that I was going to jail. Well, it was a dream, and I interpreted the dream as meaning that. But I saw a snake and that snake bit me, and I was wounded. But the wound healed. There was always a scar there, but the wound, the pain, was gone. And the next morning when I awoke I—this fella named [Dorie] Miller, he and I was pretty close—called Miller, and I told him about the dream. And he said, “Well, what does it mean?” And I said, “Well, we’re going to jail.” “But we won’t stay; they’ll let us out, we’ll go back to duty, but we’ll always have this mark against us; but it won’t bother us in civilian life.” We were always concerned about getting out of the Navy without any of our rights. See what I mean?
- Allen: Mm-hmm.
- Small: You do a hitch in the Armed Services and when you come out you have no rights—you can’t draw social security, you can’t get a job, you can’t get unemployment.
- Allen: You mean if you have a dishonorable.

- Small: Yeah, see. We were always concerned about that, so I was mostly consoled with the idea that I was going to jail, I wasn't worried about that. And that I was going to get out of jail, and I was coming back to civilian life, see what I mean? So the only thing that concerned me was how I fared while in jail. The fact that I was going to jail was definite. And the fact that I was going to get out was definite. I believed that, but what going to happen during my jail term—that was something I didn't know about. Like you know that they're going to bring you through that door, and they're going to take you out that back door, but what happens between these two doors you don't know: this is what you're concerned about. And that is what I was concerned about. What is going to happen to me while I'm on this barge.
- Allen: You're right between the two doors.
- Small: I'm right between the two doors, see what I mean?
- Allen: Yeah, yeah.
- Small: And I tried to calm the men down because what happened to them would happen to me. And I told them when we were at Treasure Island when we were imprisoned there, this is after the trial. One of them came to me and said, "Small, you said we was going to jail, didn't you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "But you said we would get out." And I said, "We will." Just like that. I said, "All you gotta do is keep your nose clean, and you'll get out." We stayed sixteen months; they gave us fifteen years, and we stayed there I think sixteen months. And we were out, and gone. So my dream materialized, it came true. And there was no real bad thing that happened to me during it—between my imprisonment and my extraction there was not anything detrimental to my health that happened. But I feel that had I not acted as I did, when I did, something would have happened. I would have come out a cripple. Not dead, they wouldn't have killed me, but I'd a come out a cripple, or come out with a wound, or disfigurement that would hamper my progress in civilian life, something like that. So what I did was essential to my health and to my wellbeing. See? And this is what I was looking forward to. I wasn't trying to take over the Navy, or assume command of anything. Or trying to incite a mob to riot. In fact, I was trying to stave off a riot.
- Allen: Right. But in trying to calm the men down were you also trying to keep them together?
- Small: Yes.
- Allen: Because if the group broke apart, and each man sort of went his own way, and did his own thing—

Small: But there was another element on the barge where some wanted to do this, some wanted to do that.

Allen: What was the this, and the that?

Small: You follow me now? For instance, one fella says, "There's no rule that says we have to march in ranks to go to chow. We can just walk." See what I mean? And, "I'm not gonna march to no cadence no more. I'm just going to walk." See? And another fella says, "Look, man, you're in the Navy. And you got to abide by Navy rules." "So-and-so the Navy rules." And then they start separating, you see? "Alright, you march; I don't march." Then this fella says, "Well, you're in the Navy." "Well, I'm with you" "I'm with you." See, here's a division among the men right on the barge. And rights had broken out over differences of opinion. Two men would get to fighting right there on the barge because one thought that he should go back to duty and another thought he shouldn't. So, with me to bring them down to one way of thinking, because as long as there was a division on the barge there's a chance of a riot. Not among the keepers and the kept; but among the kept, right there, among the prisoners. There could have been a riot. And if five men got to fighting on that barge, ten or twelve would get killed. That's how densely packed we were. Who knows whether they had a gun? I never saw a gun; I saw knives, I saw sheaves, I saw spoons made into knives and forks made into knives, and I saw pieces of metal sharpened and made into knives, but I never saw a gun. There was no way of knowing whether a gun was on there or not. See what I mean? It was my main responsibility to keep peace on that barge. That's what I was trying to do. That came out during the trial. My defense attorney brought it out scantily—they touched on it, you know. It was never enough to really have any meaning concerning the verdict. But the verdict was inevitable, from the beginning; I knew that. The verdict was inevitable. Regardless of what went on during the trial or what was said or what was—what rebuttal there was, the verdict was inevitable. Guilty of mutiny, the United States then being in a state of war. That was the verdict, and that was the presumed verdict even before we went to trial; and I knew it, too.

Allen: What was the thing you mentioned about public sentiment? While you were on the barge?

Small: Well, there was a lot of people down there from the outside world. Thurgood Marshall was down there.

Allen: This was during the trial itself. Was there any—?

Small: Yes, there were several prominent people sitting in the audience, in the gallery, during the trial. And I remember a woman, I can't remember her name now, who she was, but she asked to talk to me and she was refused. And Thurgood Marshall, I did talk to him for about ten or fifteen minutes I think, but this woman—she was a very prominent woman at that time—I can't remember who she was, a black woman. And there was a man in Chicago that had raised \$100,000 for our defense, toward our defense. And, he was supposed to be there. What was his name? He was a lobbyist, a black lobbyist.

Allen: It wasn't Lester Granger? He was with the Urban League.

Small: No. No. I would know his name if I heard it, but I can't remember it right now. Anyhow, it was rumored that he had raised \$100,000 and he was going to hire civilian lawyers to defend us. And we wound up with five military lawyers. Five Navy lawyers, but we had our hopes up high that we were going to have civilian lawyers. That was going to use public sentiment, see, in our favor, and was gonna rouse the population against the injustice that we were going through. Bu none of this ever materialized. And after it was all over I heard again that he had absconded with the \$100,000, and nobody knew what happened to him or the money, either. See what I mean? So there was a lot of rumors going around. You know. Somebody whispered through the barracks one day, "Everything is all right—I read in the paper this morning that you're gonna be acquitted." You know. And you don't know who it was—the barracks windows was just little holes, you know, too small for a man to get out of—it was more a vent than a window—and you don't know who it was, but anything you heard that was encouraging, you grabbed at it. You see what I mean? And these rumors was flyin' around all over the place, you know. "The judge advocate got killed, and the trial's gonna be held up because they gotta appoint a new judge and he's gonna be black, and—" oh boy. But we came through it. And I'm more convinced now than ever that the Navy was just saving face by finding us guilty. I was convinced of that a long time ago. That the Navy just found us guilty to save face. That no bunch of—pardon the expression—niggers, is gonna refuse to do what we tell them to do. We'll fix them. We'll make an example of them. And that's just what they did.

Allen: Yeah. Yeah, well, that's certainly clear that that's what they were trying to do. But, let's see, um, at the trial itself: in reading the testimony there was only one instance, one time I think, where there was any real—where they discussed the work conditions. I think that was the one point where Ollie Green said that, "They made us race against each other on loading the ammunition." And then there are one or two other references, but not really much was said about the working conditions. Why don't you think that came out at the trial? Or was that part of the defense strategy—?

- Small: Well, see, the defense couldn't use that in our behalf. I mean, they couldn't use that in our favor, and it would only be damaging to the Navy, and they were all Navy.
- Allen: They were all Navy, right.
- Small: And this testimony wouldn't do us any good; it would only damage the Navy. So why bring it out?
- Allen: Did you discuss it with these Navy Lieutenants at all?
- Small: Oh, yes. I discussed it with them lengthily. Working conditions and the betting among the officers, and everything was discussed generally, but it didn't come out in the trial. We couldn't volunteer any information; we could only answer questions that was put to us. See what I mean? And most of those questions had to be answered yes or no. And if you volunteered anything, they would tell you please answer the question yes or no. Se we didn't get a chance to bring out any information that they didn't want brought out. And if—I wasn't at Ollie Green's testimony, but if he did get a chance to say something about racing, or working conditions, he's about the only one that did.
- Allen: By accident! Nobody asked him. At the end of his testimony they said, "Do you have anything further to say?" And you're supposed to say, "No, sir." But he talked for a couple of minutes about the conditions.
- Small: Well, see, that's the way it got in there. Because they never would have introduced that testimony.
- Allen: No. No way.
- Small: They never would. The defense or the prosecution would never have opened up any grounds for that testimony. Because working conditions there was—atrocious. That's my word for today. Atrocious, but we had to go through it—what, we had no alternative, you know.
- Allen: Oh, one of the things that's in the trial testimony is that when the men were asked why didn't you go back to work or what was your—Almost to a man, the response was, "I was afraid of ammunition, and therefore didn't want to go back to work with the ammunition."
- Small: That came about because of my testimony. I didn't instruct them to say that, but because they heard my reason for not going back they considered that a good reason, they used it.

- Allen: This actually came out before the trial, while you were at—
- Small: Vallejo, yeah. This is where that came out, because lieutenant asked me was I going back to work, and I told him no, and he asked me why. I told him I was afraid. See what I mean, and there were 250 men that heard that answer. So I assume they all figured that if Small used it, it's a good answer, so they all used it. I actually told him that my reason for not going was because I was afraid. But it wasn't afraid in the sense that he looked at it: Cowardice. It wasn't cowardice. It was afraid of going back in the same working conditions that we were in. And that if I went back in the same conditions it would continue. I mean, you don't jump in a mudhole and expect to clean it out after you get in there. You clean it out, and then get in. And this was my reasoning, see. When I told him I refused to go back because I was afraid; that answer, as you say, was picked up generally by everybody else.
- Allen: Okay, 'cause one of the things they did try to do in the trial was to say, "Well, who told you to say that?"
- Small: Uhuh.
- Allen: Right? And again they were trying to find somebody that they could pin it on by saying, "Well, this is the man who told these other men to say such-and-such a thing."
- Small: That did come out in the trial, because they had asked me, did I tell the other men to say they were afraid. See and I didn't tell anyone to say he was afraid. I said I was afraid; they picked it up themselves. But I think I remember them trying to pin that on me as instructing them to say there were afraid. But I didn't.
- Allen: After you were on the barge and then they called you out and the men were assembled on—I think it was a baseball diamond—in U-shape formation and the Admiral comes out and spoke, and threatened the men with being shot for mutiny and so forth. And I don't know whether he was still there or whether he left, but anyhow, then the lieutenants order the men or got the men to indicate whether or not they were willing to obey all orders or not, right?
- Small: Right.
- Allen: What happened at that point, do you recall?
- Small: I don't think I was there. I think I had been removed because if my memory is correct this happened when we left the barracks, marching towards the docks or the drill field?

Allen: Oh, here it is. Okay, "After the Admiral's talk, Lieutenant Delucchi gave an order to—" Oh, here. That section there.

Small: [reading from a document]
"After the admiral's talk, and after you had about-faced the men, and after Lieutenant Delucchi's order, what happened?"

"Lieutenant Delucchi came over to the division. He stood in front of them and said, 'I have been ordered by my superior officer to order you men to go to work. All men that are willing to obey all orders anywhere at any time, fall in behind me.'"

"What happened then?"

"Well, for fifteen or twenty seconds they all stood still. And then two fell out in the front ranks, just about in the center. Two men fell out and the whole division followed them; all except four or five."

"All except four or five followed Lieutenant Delucchi?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then what happened?"

"Well, I was in the bunch that went over behind him, but then I stopped and stood still. I concentrated on what he had said. Then I went back over to the other side. Just before I moved, he told me to call the men to attention and I gave them Right-Face. I did that then. Then I moved back over with the rest of the men."

"Did you say anything to Lieutenant Delucchi when you moved over?"

"No, sir."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"No, sir."

"Why did you move over with the four or five men?"

"Because I understood his remarks wrong. At first he said, 'All men that are willing to obey all orders, anyplace at any time, fall in over here.' At that time I realized that the order could be to load ammunition. And that's an order that I wasn't willing to obey."

I think I recall that, too.

“Why not?”

“I was afraid of the ammunition.”

“Why were you afraid?”

“I had worked in the ammunition ten months. And from the way it was handled I could expect the same thing anytime. I expected it “interrupting here.”

“You mean there was danger handling ammunition?”

“That’s right, yes, sir.”

“And the danger in handling ammunition was something that made you afraid to handle ammunition, is that right?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“Was your fear brought about by the explosion?”

“Yes, sir, the majority of it was. The majority of it, yes, sir.”

“Had you been afraid to handle ammunition before the explosion?”

“Yes, sir.”

Well this is all in line with what I was saying. Now, I seem to remember now that incident with the lieutenant.

Allen: Let me just say this: this is page 377 and 378 of the transcript. What I wanted to ask about that is that you said, okay, there were four or five men who at first refused. But then, later that same day, other men at the same time came over and joined you. And I was trying to figure out how that happened. If you remember anything about that, because eventually in division number four, twenty-some odd men came over and stood in the group that was refusing. And in the other division, division number two, another twenty-so, twenty-five or so, also refused. But do you remember what happened? After you and the four or five men were standing here. And the others are over there. Some men must have gone back and forth, one way and the other.

- Small: If I remember correctly, that assembly was never completed. I mean, the men were bunched up there but they kept drifting back. Two and three at a time.
- Allen: Drifting over to where you were.
- Small: Drifting back over to where we were. See what I mean. And I don't—I'm trying to recall this initial four or five. I don't remember them. Maybe my mind was too involved with something else to record it. But I don't remember the four or five men. I do remember the conversation with Lieutenant Delucchi. But I don't remember the four or five men that were there when he asked everybody to line up behind him.
- Allen: I think Waldrop and Green were two of them, I'm not sure, who the others were. So the thing is, you were standing there for a while, so there was time for other men to come over. I guess as they thought about it or whatever.
- Small: Well, in the end, they had the whole 250 of us. See? Now, for the same charge. Now, I'm trying to figure and I can't figure out what happened, because if all the men lined up behind him and agreed to obey any order at anytime and anywhere, how did they get all 250 of us for mutiny?
- Allen: Well, they didn't. See, there was 250, right? And after this admiral talks, then what they say is, that the lieutenants gave the order: All those who'll obey stand over here, all those who won't over there, and that at that time in division number four about twenty-two men—first, four or five men—stood over there and gradually other men drifted over and joined them, so it was twenty-two. And in division number two the same thing happened: there was about twenty-two or twenty-three that said they weren't willing to obey all orders to go back to work. And then the other men were supposedly—they thought they were going to be marched off to work, but, in fact, were shipped off, probably to Shoemaker, and they were eventually give summary court martials, and others might have gotten other charges as well. But all of them at least got summary. A summary court martial.
- Small: See, I don't know about that because after that incident at Shoemaker and we were shipped to Vallejo and put aboard this barge we were all back together again. See what I mean? Now when the court martials did come down, fifty of us was singled out for the general court martial. I think I said that before: I don't know what happened to the rest of them. I never got any information as to what happened to the rest of them.
- Allen: Well, I met Willy Gay in New York; he was in the group of 200, and he says they all got summary court martials. He said they were jailed for

about six months. And then they were shipped out overseas the same way you were. They were shipped out overseas for a year, several months anyhow, and then finally, they were discharged. But they went to jail.

Small: But they did go to jail, and got summary court martials.

Allen: They got summary court martials. Did you have any idea, you mentioned there being a spy or a snitch or somebody that gave the information.

Small: Well, I assumed that because there were no shore patrol or no guards on board the barge. So it had to be someone planted there or someone within our own midst that carried this information out. See what I mean? I say that because from the way they had the information verbatim, it had to be somebody there that was there for the express purpose of getting that information. I don't think they could have gathered it verbatim from the men that were there, one word from this one, one word from this one. I think someone had to be there to pay close attention to what was said and what was done and carry back a complete report.

Allen: Well, I think you're probably right about that. 'Cause in reading the trial testimony at the very end of the trial the prosecutor, the judge advocate, brought in some of these officers who had taken statements—you remember those statements that were taken at Shoemaker.

Small: Yeah.

Allen: And they were quizzed about the accuracy of the statements because there was a great deal of debate about whether those statements were accurate or not. But one of them, when he was quizzed by the defense attorney, he admitted that the defense attorney asked him, "Well, what kind of question did you ask, where did you get these questions that you asked them?" He said, in effect, "Well, we were instructed to ask them about certain things; about the list and about the meeting on the barge." So they were instructed to ask about these things, which meant they must have known about it then, before the interrogation. How could they have known about it?

Small: Except by an informant? That's right, so.

Allen: Right. Right.

Small: I mean, that was just my assumption that there had to be an informant that had that particular point in mind to get that information. Because I don't think they could have gotten it just piecemeal, back and forth. Because it wasn't broadcast, it wasn't publicized that there was going to be a meeting—it was a spontaneous thing. A couple of fellows came down, say, "Small, you better go up and talk to the men. They're going to start

something.” And I went up and called a meeting just like that. After a couple of minutes it was decided and started. It was impossible for them to have prepared themselves for this meeting, because we weren’t prepared for it so there had to be somebody on the barge that was there for the express purpose—to let them know what was going on.

Allen: It wasn’t until then the actual interrogation that you had reason to believe that there was somebody on the barge.

Small: That’s right; until they started asking questions. In fact, it wasn’t until the actual testimony at the trial that I became aware of the possibility that there must’ve been an informant. Because the questions they put to me could only have gotten out through somebody that heard me talking. That heard the questions I asked and the things I said. It had to be somebody that heard it and voluntarily gave the information. He could have said, “What did Small say?” And one of the other fellows, “Well he said so and so and he said so and so.” But to have it verbatim the way they had it, this is my opinion, there had to be somebody there that was there for the express purpose of getting this information. Damaging, any damaging information that they could come up with, they got it.

Allen: The other possibility I had thought of was that maybe it was somebody who was there, not necessarily planted, but that who decided, “Well, maybe I can make a deal.”

Small: Well, that’s a possibility, I thought about that, too. It could very well be. Somebody they made an offer to: if you work with us and for us, we will do such and such thing and there were men in the group that would have considered that and would have gone along with it. Men that were ready, willing and able to do whatever the Navy asked them to do. But because of the danger it might bring upon them physically, they stuck with the bunch. But inwardly they weren’t with us and so this type of man, it’s very possibility that he could have been changed over into an informant and it could have been one of us originally. Because any stranger on the barge, somebody would have known it. I think somebody would have recognized a stranger that wasn’t in one of the two divisions. There weren’t any white fellas there, either officers or guards or anything else. There wasn’t any whites on the barge at all. We were all black, and we were all enlisted men. And we were all prisoners. So it’s a possibility that one of the prisoners could have been persuaded to turn informer.

Allen: When you got to Shoemaker they put you in solitary, is that right? After you were taken from the barge and taken up to the brig at Shoemaker. Then they separated you from the rest of them, and put you in solitary.

Small: I don't remember that. It could have happened, but I don't remember it—I don't recall it right now.

Allen: That's in the testimony, too, and anyway, I took that as additional evidence here that there was an informer or snitch of some sort because why would they single you out? To put you in solitary confinement even before they had started the interrogation.

Small: You know, it may have been solitary confinement but since I don't remember it as solitary confinement I must have thought it was something else. It's a possibility that I thought it was something else when it was really solitary confinement. Do you follow what I'm trying to say? Because I don't remember being separated from the men and confined by myself.

Allen: Yeah. I don't know if I can find it off hand. Actually—oh here it is, okay. Says question 184 there: "How long did you stay in the brig?" "Well, I don't know. Shortly after that I was put in solitary confinement." Later on you say that it was—

Small: This solitary confinement in my mind, I can't seem to recall it. I don't doubt that it happened. I can't seem to recall it, though. So many things went on, you know? So many things said, so many things done. Thirty years ago. Boy, oh boy.

Allen: One thing that is kind of hinted at in here and what I wanted to ask about is that there may have been more than one list that was circulated; one was circulated among the fourth division, and there may also have been a list circulated in the eighth division and second division. Because the three divisions were there together. Uh, but some of the men who were circulating the lists, like Lanier, for example, he was mentioned several times as having circulating the lists, maybe Brown, as well—they were not in the group of fifty, that was charged with mutiny. I guess at the time of the admiral's meeting with the lieutenant who said, that those going back come over here and those who are not going back go over there; they must have gone on the side that said they were going back.

Small: As I remember, Lanier was more educated, he was more refined, than the general bunch of us. His conversation was on a higher plane; he used larger words, you know what I mean? He had a better education. And he considered himself a step above the rest of us. And he was the type of man that, if he thought he could influence a bunch of men, whether it was right or wrong, he would try that. To gain prestige for himself. And if rebutting your statement or going against your idea made him look greater, then he would go for it. He was one of the men with the petition, but it didn't go over because he wasn't a leader. I'll say it that way. He wasn't the type of

man that the men would follow. He didn't have the stamina, the fortitude, to stand up and make himself a leader. The men would come to me and ask me a question, and I would give them an answer. They could figure out themselves if that that was the right answer. Lanier would give them an answer, but the answer was always calculated as to whether it was better for him, or who would profit by it. That was one reason why I was chosen as the leader over him, in the ranks. He wasn't a petty officer, he was in the ranks along with us. But I called cadence outside the ranks, and I demanded—I guess you could use that phrase—I demanded respect; I mean, I would tell a man, "Shut up. You talk too much." Look him straight in the eye, and he'd get the opinion I meant what I said, and if he didn't shut up the repercussions would be disastrous. And through that attitude I gained the respect of the men, see. And Lanier didn't have that. He did a lot of talking, he went to the front on a lot of things, but when he did it he did it for his own good. See what I mean? And that's why his petition didn't go over.

Allen: And in the end he flaked out—

Small: Petered out. He didn't have any convictions, you might say, he didn't have any concrete convictions. He flowed with the tide. But he tried to stay on top. That's all. When the tide swung, he swung along with it. He didn't have any definite direction that he had made up his mind that he'd wanted to go. Which was different from me; I made up my mind what I wanted to do, and even when I knew I was going to jail, I stuck to my guns. I went the way I had decided to go. There was fifty of us that made that decision. We were the ones that got the general court martial.

Allen: Well, in trying to look at this and describe what happened there, would you say it's accurate to describe it as, well, a work stoppage—not really a strike, I guess. Although if it had happened in civilian life it would have been called a strike, right?

Small: Well, I think "work stoppage" is more descriptive of what happened, because when you strike you have a reason for striking that's in your favor. Money or working conditions, or something like that that's in your favor. But we considered that this refusing to go back to work was as much in the Navy's favor as it was ours. You see what I mean?

Allen: No.

Small: Let me say it this way: we were in danger of losing our lives, but the Navy was in the danger of losing ships and equipment that we worked with. And docks, and piers. See what I mean? The main interest was ourselves, I mean we were a little bit selfish in that respect. Because I was looking out for Joe. See what I mean. And I think all of the other men were interested

in protecting their own lives, but the Navy had an interest in this, too. They would lose a lot. I mean, let me say it this way. Suppose you had a job going—a building going up. And if you finish that building you're gonna lose your shirt, see what I mean. But working conditions on that building, because you can't afford to make them any better, cause us to stop work. You see what I mean? Now, if we go back to work we endanger our lives. But we also realize if we go back to work you're going to lose a pile of money. So it's not your fault we're not working. But, because of our not working, it's going to save you a lot of money. As well as save our lives. And this was the situation at Port Chicago. I was as much concerned about the Navy in the condition that they were, and the improvement that was supposed to be done on that base, and the living conditions of the men, as I was about losing my life. And I wasn't afraid of dying. I never have been afraid of dying; I've been afraid of getting hurt, of living a cripple. Getting maimed to the point where I would be dependent on somebody else to care for me. But as for dying, I ain't worried about dying. And I wasn't worried then. Just, I thought that in refusing to go to work we would, and refusing to return to work, we would better working conditions. We, or I—I speak for myself—I made up my mind, and that's what I was going to do and that's what I did.

Allen: How did you feel about being put in that leadership position? I mean, you seem to be saying that that's not something you asked for.

Small: No, it wasn't something I asked for.

Allen: The men kind of thrust that on you because of who you were and what you were doing, and their respect for you. But how did you feel about it? I guess, in that whole situation as you were coming through it, there.

Small: Well. I accepted it as being inevitable. In the CC camp the same thing happened; I mean, I was one of the men cutting brush in the woods with an axe, and two fellas got in an argument, and they had brush axes. And I stepped in between them, and stopped the argument. And asked them both for the brush axe, "You give me your axe, and you give me your axe." And that stopped the fight. Well then, the men began to respect me. To look up to me. And one of the officers called me one day, said, "Small, you have a natural leadership ability, I'm going to make you a lieutenant." And I became a lieutenant and was given a crew. When I got in the service the same thing happened. It was no outward workings on my part; I didn't work for that, it just was thrust upon me, and I considered it inevitable that it happened. And I accepted it. See what I mean? I could have refused it, but I rather enjoyed marching outside of the ranks. See what I mean, and calling cadence. That's where it started. I had a strong voice, my projection was good, and my timing was good, so I started calling cadence.

Allen: How did that happen? How were you selected to call cadence?

Small: I don't know, really. I remember one day we had a petty officer calling cadence and they had to separate some of the men; we were on the drill field. And they had to separate some of the men, and somebody said, "Small can call cadence." And that's where it started. I had about three men, I think, and we were marching up and down the drill field. And then, a couple of days later the petty officers were late getting back or something like that, and they asked me to call cadence. And I was in the rank calling cadence, and then somebody said, "I can't hear him, let him get outside," and I stepped outside the ranks and from then on I was the official cadence caller for the division. And then the petty officer used to come in in the morning and they used a lot of profanity, you know? And Navy vernacular [whispers], things like that, you know. I'd go shake the men, "Alright, buddy, let's go. Get up." You know, and they'd come and grab the mattress and dump them out of bed. Then there would be a fight, because them men would fight in a minute. Petty officer or nobody, and they'd wind end up in the brig, you know, on KP or something. So gradually they stopped asking the petty officers questions; they'd ask me. And I was always an early riser. I was always the first one up in the morning. It became my expected job to wake the men up and get them out of there. And that's just the way it went, from that a little further, a little further, and after a while when this incident happened I was considered the head of the bunch. They used to call me from the quarter-deck, in place of the petty officers, if there was some business to transact with the division. They would call me over, and the petty officers would be in their rooms sleeping, or laying down or something, and they would call me to go and transact business for the division. But it was thrust on me because—well, without sounding silly—I had the ability. And they recognized it but they wouldn't give me the rank. Delucchi told me I was too young. But I did the job. See. Down on the ship I was one of the dock hands, working on the dock. And they had four winches in operation and they had five winchmen. One winchman was a relief; whenever a winchman wanted to leave his post, then they had a replacement there to take over for him for ten minutes. [talks to wife] So a fella had to leave on an emergency, and he just walked off from the winch. He just dropped it and walked away, you know. And somebody, "HEY! Where's that winchman?" And I had been playing around with the winch; during our break at lunchtime I'd go up and play with it, I said, "I'll run it while he's gone." I went up and took over. It was a steam one; it was very difficult to operate, in that the positions was very ticklish. Not like an electric winch. I operated it to the satisfaction of the lieutenant, so whenever they needed a replacement or relief man, they called on me and eventually I took over the job completely. Same thing happened working for the Bud Company. I used to go up and ride with the crane operator. During my break or lunch hour I'd ride with him and one night he got sick, he had a gallstone attack

and they brought him down out of the crane, and I took over his crane. From then on, I became the crane operator. What I'm trying to say is that I have never thrust myself into these positions, but one way or another I found myself in them. I started up here at this school—this CDP up here, Child Development Center, as a crew member—and that's the bottom of the totem pole. I started there in March and two weeks later they made me carpenter. Two weeks ago they made me a project supervisor, and I haven't asked for any of that. See what I mean? They haven't given me any raise in pay, but all of a sudden men are bringing their timesheets to me to sign, they're filling out their vacation requests and they're bringing them to me—I said, "What are you bringing them to me for?" I said, "K.K. is your project supervisor." "K.K. told me to bring them to you." I took them and went to the office, and I said, "Hey, these fellas are bringing me their timesheets and things to sign." And they said, "Who else they going to bring them to, you're their project supervisor!" I said, "When did this happen?" "We had a meeting last night, and we decided it." You see what I mean? No one said anything to me, then all of a sudden, when I went there, I had a saw and a hammer and I worked with the crew. Two weeks later, they gave me a whole box of tools to work with. Two weeks ago I have twenty men under me and I have three crews that I'm supervising now. I didn't ask for it was just here, you take it. That's the way it's always happened; through the Navy, through my CC life, it's always happened that way. Ironically as I see it I never get any money to back these things up, they give you the responsibility, but they don't give you the money to go through with it. That's the way it was in the Navy: I came out responsible for the actions of 250 men without having asked for it, or without having done anything to get it, it was just, "It's yours." That's the way it happened.

Allen: Did you, at any time, feel that you'd rather not be there?

Small: Yes! Sure. But I've never been one to shirk. I mean, once I commit myself I'll go through with it. I mean, maybe you're carrying a load that's too heavy for you, and I said, "Look, I'll help you carry it." But after I get my end of it I find out I don't want it. But then I've already said I'll do it, so regardless of the consequences I'll go through with it. See what I mean, and there's many times when I would tell the men, "Look, you got a petty officer. You go talk with your petty officer." "Oh, that so-and-so-and-so-and-so—I'd rather talk with you. You don't tell me so and so well forget about it." You know? And rather than see the man lose out altogether, I'll instruct him, explain to him the situation, and whatever information he wanted I'd try to get it to him, see. Because if he went to the petty officer he wouldn't get from the petty officer what I could give him. And that just put me in deeper. Because that man would tell somebody else, "If you want to know so and so you ask Small." And that's way I got into it.

Allen: Well, there were just a couple of other things I wanted to ask. Somewhere, it's not in the trial transcript or anything of that sort, but in the NAACP, the little pamphlet that they published on the case, there's a reference to, that before the 250 men refused to go back to work, that another 100 men at Port Chicago had also refused to go back to work, earlier—I mean, after the explosion but before the men that you were with refused. Did you ever heard anything about that or know anything about that?

Small: No.

Allen: As I said, I haven't found any evidence of that at all except this one little paragraph in this pamphlet that was published by the NAACP.

Small: No, I never heard of any separate group from ours that refused to go back to work. I know there were some men that escaped death and injury that was right at the scene of the explosion, but I don't know what happened to them—I never heard anything from them. But as for another group prior to ours that refused to go back to work, I never heard, I don't remember anything.

Allen: Oh, I think it was supposedly men in division one. Was there a division one there?

Small: I don't know. I don't remember.

Allen: If I remember, when I looked at the list of divisions, I didn't even see a division one; there was two, three, four, five and six, there was no division seven, I don't think; there was a division eight and division ten. But they skipped some of the numbers.

Small: See, I don't remember that. I don't recall how many divisions there were. I know there was four, five and six. I know there was four, five and six, and I seem to recall eight and ten. I remember division two, but I don't remember division one, and I don't remember division three. There was some reason why there wasn't a division seven, and I think it was because the barracks was incomplete. The barracks was incomplete, and there was nobody living in that barracks, and that's why there was no division Seven. division seven's barracks was there but it was incomplete. Now, three—I don't—

Allen: I think they were working on one of the ships that exploded, they were all killed.

Small: It could have been.

- Allen: In fact, they might have been a new division, because one of the divisions that was working on the ships was brand new. I mean, they were just out of boot camp.
- Small: It could have been, it could have been. Because every time they brought in a new bunch they made a new division. That could have been possible that they were a new division that had just come in. I know there was usually two divisions on the dock at one time; two divisions worked together. But I don't remember a division three.
- Allen: Okay. One more question about when they had that interrogation at Shoemaker. Taking all the statements from the men, when they were calling you in individually to question you and so on, was there discussion among the men about what was going on?
- Small: No, because we didn't know where we were going until after we got back. See, when they called us out for this interview, see what I mean, we weren't told where we were going or for what purpose. And then we weren't allowed to return to the group when we got back. In other words, once you were interviewed you were separated from the rest of the men that hadn't been interviewed, and the men that hadn't been interviewed didn't know they were going to be interviewed. They was just taken up and asked these questions. I think in my statement there I remember saying that I didn't know that I was being interrogated—I just answered questions.
- Allen: Right, yeah. So you didn't even know who it was that these—who these men were that were asking you questions. Or what they represented.
- Small: That's right, didn't know who they were, or who they represented or anything. Was just asked questions, and we answered them. I mean, after all, we were sailors and in the Navy, obligated to the Navy, under the jurisdiction of the Navy, and to refuse to answer questions or to ask a whole lot of questions yourself—who are you? I mean this was out of the question, you know what I mean.
- Allen: Did you have much news of the outside world while you were at Port Chicago, did you get papers like the Pittsburgh Courier, Chicago Defender, or any kind of contact with the outside world?
- Small: At Port Chicago? Oh, yeah. We had radios, and we had the newspapers, and we went to Frisco, we went to Oakland, we went to Berkeley, various towns around there, so we had contact with the outside world. But at that date and time—to use an old phrase—I wasn't too concerned about what was going on out in the world. I mean I had a job to do during my work period, and when my work period was over I was concerned with

recreation and enjoying myself. A letter from home: now, my main recreation at that time was writing letters, and I used to write from fifteen to twenty letters a day. I mean, I wrote to girls all over the world; I don't mean all over the States, I mean all over the world. Wherever I got an address, a name and an address, I wrote the girl. And I received stacks of mail like that—they used to have my mail tied up. I would read each letter, and as I read it I would answer it. That's the way I passed most of my time. I didn't visit the nightclubs, I didn't visit the honky-tonks on seventh street in Oakland; the most I did, when I went off the base I went to the movies, something like that and back to the base. And I read and wrote letters. I wasn't too concerned about the outside world, it was just my own little world right there. And most of us were the same way. We kept contact with home, but that was about it.

Allen: Umhmmm. What was the attitude towards the war among the men?

Small: It wasn't discussed. We weren't concerned about it. I mean, I wasn't. I wasn't concerned about it. I knew that my job, what I was doing, supported the war, but this was what I was expected to do in my job. It was my job and I did it. If the Japs and Americans got into trouble over in Iwo Jima or Okinawa or somewhere, we knew about it but we weren't concerned. Know what I mean? I had no brothers over there, I had no close friends over there. All of my close friends I left here, and the only friends I had then I met them after I got to Port Chicago, see what I mean? Even the friends that I had at Great Lakes, the ones that didn't go with me to Port Chicago, they were forgotten. So it was our own little world down there. We were more concerned about our own little clique, working, and not being punished for not doing enough work or looking forward to a punishment for not having done enough work, you see what I mean? And getting out on liberty and having a little fun, and getting back and going to bed. Work, liberty, and bed, work, liberty, and back to bed, and that was it. I don't know one man that was concerned or showed a great concern for the war. Nobody did. We were just loading ammunition, and as far as I was concerned, my concern with the war started when that bomb came out of the boxcar, and ended when I set it down in the hold of the ship. That was the end. That's the way it was.

Allen: Well, I guess again in trying to sum it up, I guess I asked this question earlier about whether you would describe it as a work stoppage or not, because part of the problem I'm having in trying to research and write it up is that the position that the NAACP took, and the position that the defense attorneys took, was that there was no work stoppage, it was just that—I mean, there was no deliberate work stoppage, the men just, it was just a question of the men fell out and just, kind of in shock or something like that, and therefore were not even fully aware that they were refusing to go back to work.

Small: Well, I think that's possibly—I think that's a good way of looking at it. And I think that's the way a lot of the men looked at it. Or felt about the situation. That they were justified in not going back to work; not looking at the fact that they weren't going back to work or they were refusing a direct order, but that they were doing the right thing, see what I mean? And when you consider something as right, you don't look at the alternatives. See what I mean? When you make up your mind that you've angered me to a point that I'm going to punch you in the mouth, and you decide that you're going to punch that man in the mouth, then the next thing is action. Not what's going to happen after you punch him in the mouth. You see what I mean. Or you're not aware of what brought you up to this decision. The fact is now you've decided to do it, and this is what's directly in front of you. And the Navy had brought us up to a point where we—I say, me—I considered it the proper thing to do, to refuse to go back to work. You see what I mean? And that is the action I took.

Allen: Well, that's what I'm trying to get at, because I guess because of the defense strategy and the NAACP's campaign afterwards, they took the position that nobody decided anything. That it was not a matter of the men ever deciding not to go back to work; it was just a thing that happened when it happened.

Small: That's right, it wasn't a thing that was thought over and discussed in that respect. "Will we go or won't we go?" It wasn't discussed. But it was just that situations demanded that we take that course of action. At that particular moment. Had the situation been different, the action would have been different. You see what I mean? But the Navy in their actions, in their handling of our lives, had brought us down to the point where this was the necessary course of action at that particular moment. And there was nothing to discuss. There was no ifs, ands or buts about it. Now, some of them was hesitant about taking that course of action, because of the repercussions that might follow it. But the ones that really was against the working conditions, had no alternative but to take that course of action.

Allen: Okay. Well, this is what I want to link up. Since in the trial there was only one or two instances where the working conditions are ever discussed, the trial itself, then, in that testimony, is not the whole story.

Small: No!

Allen: I mean, that's not even half the story.

Small: That's why I always knew that the verdict was mandatory. The Navy could come up with—regardless of what was brought out during the trial or what testimony was brought out, or who was found to be guilty of

what—the verdict would have been the same. Not because the verdict would have been justified, but because it was the only way to save face.

Allen: Save face, right. Okay.

Small: See what I mean? I said this before; it's like a man that is going to whip his child. He has the authority and the ability to do it. Now whether the child is right or wrong I'm going to give you a whipping. "Now don't tell me what you did or why you did it. I'm going to whip you." Because I'm your father and I have the right. This is the position the Navy took. "I have the right to put you in jail. Now whether you're guilty of what you're charged with or whether you're not guilty of it, or whether it's an expected course of action that you're taking, or whether you're justified in it, or not justified, I'm going to put you in jail. But in order to put you in jail, I must do something to justify my action, so I'm going to take you through a trial, and I'm going to rig that trial so that nobody can say that I did it without giving you a fair trial. But you're going to jail, regardless." And that's what happened.

Allen: Well the thing I want to bring out is the kind of things we've been talking about which is not anywhere in this written stuff. Which is what were the conditions there, the working conditions, the forced competition, the general condition of the base, and the fact that long before this explosion took place, in various ways, men had expressed their complaints about these conditions; their dissatisfaction, and that therefore, in a way, the explosion may have set off the work refusal, but actually the explosion was not really the cause of it; the cause of it was the conditions at the base. Which was also the cause of the explosion.

Small: That's right, that's right. That work stoppage was inevitable. It would have happened. But something had to happen in order to give it a shove. To bring it about. The explosion was the instrument by which all of this injustice was brought to light. You see what I mean? Had the explosion not happened, 375 men would not have lost their lives, but eventually something would have happened to bring about this work stoppage. That the conditions might be exposed. It would have happened one way or another. It just so happens that the explosion come about and that was the opportunity for us to realize that what we were in fear of all the time came true. It did happen. Now you want me to go back to the same thing I was doing under the same conditions and open myself up to the possibility of the same thing happening again, and I may not escape this time. I escaped that time, but the next time it may get me. So my only way of changing that is to not work. It wasn't a planned thing, it was just brought on by circumstance and working conditions; it was inevitable. Just the same way the explosion was inevitable—that explosion would have happened sooner or later. Something would have happened to set off that explosion because

the way they were handling that ammunition, it had to happen. It had to happen. I mean, you take a man tossing a knife in the air. Catching it by the handle. If he does it long enough he's going to catch it by the blade. And when he catches it by the blade he's going to get cut. And that's the same thing they did. They played with that ammunition, and played with it, and played with it, and boom! The explosion was inevitable. It had to happen sooner or later. What else can I say? It's been thirty years ago, but that is more vivid in my memory than the actual court martial. The conditions under which we were working, because they were appalling. And that's what we all were trying to get out of. But we had no way to get out of it. The explosion was an avenue of escape, and I think, my own personal opinion, I would have been stupid to say to that man, "Yes, I'll go back to work." Knowing that conditions were the same, the officers were the same, the dangers of what had happened were the same, so I had to say, "No." It was the only way to change it. One of the men asked me if I had—if I found myself in the same circumstances under the same conditions, would I do the same thing? And I told him, yes, I think I would. See. But I had the advantage over most of the other men, I believe, because I believed that I had been told what was going to happen to me; that I was going to jail, but that I would get out of jail, that there would be a scar but I wouldn't lose my life.

Allen: That was the dream.

Small: Uhuh, and I believed that. And we were in jail on Yerba Buena Island—a lot of the men were crying, a lot of the fellas was crying about being in jail; this was after the sentence of fifteen years hard labor. And I told them about that dream, and it calmed a lot of them. It calmed a lot of them, and I became very well respected by them because of that; because they believed that what I believed was the truth, and I really believed it. And it happened just the same way I dreamed. This snake bit me, but I was cured of the snake bite, it left a scar—but it didn't kill me. And that's just the way it happened. Proof of it; I'm here. Thirty years later. Well, Mr. Allen, I hope that this had been profitable to you.

Allen: It certainly has—I appreciate your taking so much time to talk with me again.

Small: I want to read this to my children, to let them know some of the things Daddy went through.

Interview 3: June 10, 1978

[Final transcript review in progress.]

Interview 4: October 10, 1985

Allen: Today is Thursday October tenth, Robert Allen interviewing Joseph R. Small concerning Port Chicago disaster of 1944. Well there are a couple of things I just want to go back to, couple of background questions, and then questions about the day itself. One was, before, we never talked about your schooling. Maybe just tell me a little bit about your—

Small: As far as the Navy is concerned?

Allen: No, before you went into the Navy.

Small: [laughs] Well, my schooling consisted of seven years of public school. And I didn't complete the seventh grade. I was asked to withdraw from school in September of 1937. At that time I was sixteen years old and there were really two reasons: my father wanted me home to work on the farm, and I had settled accounts with a boy that had been pestering me for the whole previous school year. He had been calling me "smokey" and I had promised that I would rectify the situation at the first opportunity. And it didn't present itself until we returned to school in September of 1937 and he called me "smokey" and his big cousin wasn't with him. And I put a good whipping on him. So they asked me to—they gave me an alternative, either you leave school or you're going to be sent to the reform school. So I left school.

Allen: This was a white kid?

Small: This was a white kid, yes. And they were both named Andy Naggy. They were first cousins, but one was six foot two and weighed over 200 pounds and the other one was my size, which was about 165 pounds, five foot eight. And every time he called me "smokey," he would run and get behind his cousin. But I promised him one day that I would catch him when his cousin wasn't with him, and I did. And that ended my formal education.

Allen: Where was this? What school was it?

Small: Well at that time it was the junior high school in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Now it's called an intermediate school, or middle school, but at that time it was junior high. And that was the extent of my formal education.

Allen: Okay. You were drafted in 1943 so your family was living in New Brunswick at that time.

Small: Yes, we were living in New Brunswick.

- Allen: Okay so you were drafted into the New Brunswick induction station, wherever that was.
- Small: No. Well, I was drafted from New Brunswick, but the induction station was in Newark. We had to go to Newark for our examination and we were shipped out of Newark to Great Lakes, Illinois.
- Allen: So you went directly to Great Lakes.
- Small: Directly to the Great Lakes.
- Allen: What month were you drafted in?
- Small: July. We arrived in Great Lakes, Illinois the morning of July 4, 1943.
- Allen: And you were there for six weeks training?
- Small: Uh, no, well we were there for more than six weeks. I think it was about thirteen weeks all together. I forget now exactly how long it was, but we took our basic training in Great Lakes which was a seaman branch, they trained seaman. They had different training facilities throughout the country, where seaman and different job qualifications, you know, electricians, signal men, cooks and bakers and what have you. All or most of the seamen graduated or went through Great Lakes, Illinois.
- Allen: What was the basic nature of the training there?
- Small: It was just military, I don't know—acquaintanceship I guess, to acquaint you with the military rules and regulations. There was no skill training of any kind. We weren't trained in any particular skill. We weren't taught to tie knots, which is a basic skill for a seaman. We weren't taught to handle a ship, we weren't taught to read a compass or read a sextant; we weren't taught anything, just the basic military drills. It was mostly a physical buildup more than anything else.
- Allen: And there was no training with weapons, is that correct?
- Small: No, no training with weapons.
- Allen: No training in actual seamanship either?
- Small: No, no training in actual seamanship.
- Allen: And no training with ammunition?

- Small: No, none. The weapons we carried were dummies—dummy rifles. And they were just a show for guard duty, things like that, or parade work. It was a dummy rifle. We had no live ammunition, no real ammunition, no real weapons of any kind.
- Allen: Is there anything about that training that stands out particularly in your mind? Any incident, anything that happened, any impression about it that still sticks with you, stands out?
- Small: No, I mean, not where the Navy is concerned. I mean I had to—how shall I say it—to make a slot for myself as far as being a man was concerned. But it had nothing to do with the Navy; this was among the recruits that I was with. You see what I mean? I had to assert myself on several occasions to ward off hostilities that were directed toward me, you see what I mean? But this had nothing to do with the Navy.
- Allen: Was this problem in particular with the northern guys or southern guys?
- Small: Well no, not necessarily. We were all black in the first place. We went through Camp Robert Small in Great Lakes, Illinois, and that was all black. We had white officers. I think we had black petty officers; anything above petty officer was white. It was just a general class of fella—it wasn't particularly northern or southern because they were all black. There was no race conflict because there was no one there to fight with. We had a mess hall, we went to the mess hall with white companies. They sat in their section and we sat in our section, but that was mostly a self-implied thing, you know; we sat with those that we knew. You know what I mean? There was no segregation as such in the mess hall, or in the movies, or in the recreational facilities; there was no segregation as such, but we segregated ourselves by sticking with our own. You see what I mean? There was very little racial conflict. The most racial conflict we had was with the MPs [Military Police] and they were mostly southern Marines. And we had a problem with them, but other than that, we didn't have any racial problems.
- Allen: Now what was your rating when you came out of Great Lakes?
- Small: Apprentice seaman.
- Allen: Apprentice seaman, okay. And you went directly to Port Chicago, which would have been—what month or year was that?
- Small: Now that I don't remember. I've tried to remember what month we left. Now, wait a minute, I came home on leave. I came home on leave and went back and then we were shipped from there to Port Chicago. I think it was in September.

- Allen: Must have been August or September then—
- Small: It was in September or October. I can't remember exactly when it was, but it was the early part of the winter, or the weather was just breaking. And it was either September or October. I don't remember exactly what month it was.
- Allen: Okay. Now, when you arrived in Port Chicago, you eventually were assigned to Fourth Division, were you with them from the beginning? Under [Ernest] Delucchi?
- Small: Yes.
- Allen: So that was your original division.
- Small: That was my original division at Port Chicago, yes.
- Allen: And you were an apprentice seaman when you arrived, when did you make seaman first class?
- Small: I think it was mostly when you came out of boot camp, you came out as apprentice seaman, but when you were assigned to duty, you went in as seaman second class. And then after a certain period of time, you was up to seaman first class. From then on you had to earn your rate. But the advancement to seaman first class was mostly automatic.
- Allen: Okay. But by July 1944 you were seaman first class.
- Small: Yes.
- Allen: Okay. Well I wanted to ask more specifically about the day, July seventeenth. But maybe before that, we've talked in general about your impressions of the base and the conditions there, we talked about that before. I was wondering about your impressions of the other black enlisted men. Was there anything in particular that stands out in your mind, any memories, any friends, friendships you made?
- Small: Well there was a few outstanding characters that I can remember. There was one that had been trying to get out of the Navy ever since he got drafted and came through Robert Small. Now he didn't come through the same division I did at Robert Small, but I forget his name, too. But he worked diligently to try to get some kind of a discharge. He didn't care if it was a section eight or a BCD [Bad Conduct Discharge] or dishonorable, he didn't care what it was, just so he got out.
- Allen: Is this the guy who was the homosexual?

- Small: No. This was the guy that pitched horseshoes before daylight every morning. I think I mentioned that before. He used to get up and get out of his bed, and urinate in bed, and then hang his sneakers around his neck, and go outside and pitch horseshoes. The horseshoes stayed right outside the barracks. And we would hear this “clink-clink, clink-clink.” And he would be outside pitching horseshoes, daylight in the morning. And he was trying his best to get discharged from the service, and because he tried so hard they just wouldn’t discharge him, wouldn’t let him go. And then there was another one, his name was Wideman. I remember him. He was a practical joker. There were several others. Slick Miller. Slick Miller was one. He was one of the older fellas. And he had much more experience than the average seaman there. And he used to take us around Frisco [San Francisco] and other places where we would go. He was the kind of guy that was always looking for an easy way to make money. He didn’t care who he cheated or how he got it, you know. But we followed him because he was one of the older fellas and he knew his way around. But there wasn’t anybody that made any outstanding acts of any kind that would burn into my memory.
- Allen: What barracks were you in, do you remember?
- Small: I think we were in barracks two. But they didn’t refer to us by the barracks, they called us by the division.
- Allen: Was there one division per barracks or how did they break down?
- Small: There was usually two divisions per barrack, first and second floor.
- Allen: One on each floor.
- Small: Yeah, one on each floor.
- Allen: That means there’s one-hundred and twenty-five men on each floor.
- Small: Yeah. Because when they called us—they say, for instance, “Joseph Small, Seaman First Class, Fourth Division.” See? And that’s the way they recognize us. When they played the PA system, it broadcast over the whole base. So anything that was said over that PA system, anybody on the base could hear it. So it was up to you to hear what was intended for you regardless of where you were.
- Allen: Okay. You were on the second floor?
- Small: No, I was on the first floor.

- Allen: You were on the first floor. Okay, so, Fourth Division was on the first floor, what division was above you?
- Small: Third Division.
- Allen: Third Division, these are the guys who worked on the ship that was lost.
- Small: Yes, I think they were on duty. They were on duty when the ship was destroyed because I think they went on—we came off the first shift, which was, I think, 3:30 or 4:00. And they went on.
- Allen: So you knew these guys?
- Small: Not personally, we didn't mingle inter-divisional. Now we were mostly concerned with the fellas we worked with, you know what I mean? We would see—maybe I knew a fella in the Third Division, you know, maybe I met him on the beach, and we talked, or we had a beer together. But very few, I couldn't recall a name—
- Allen: No one you personally knew in that position. Okay. The day itself, July seventeenth, now that's the day of the explosion, I want to just have a look at the chronology we list on that date. First of all, what was the customary wake-up time?
- Small: Well, we were reveille sounded at 6:00 and chow time was 7:00.
- Allen: How was reveille sounded?
- Small: Over the PA system. Somebody blew a trumpet.
- Allen: Somebody blew a trumpet over the—
- Small: Over the PA system. At 6:00. And then we mustered at 6:45 and chow was 7:00.
- Allen: Okay, now, you woke the men up, you said.
- Small: Yeah, some of them, yeah, yeah.
- Allen: And you got up yourself. You were in the upper bunk.
- Small: That's right, I was in the top bunk.
- Allen: Top bunk. Who was below you?
- Small: I don't remember.

- Allen: Okay, but you were in the top bunk. You get up, dress, and wake those who still hadn't—how'd you wake them?
- Small: Well I'd go there and shake them and say let's go fellas, it's time, you know. Sometimes I use derogatory statements, you know, but I was never rough with them. I never rode them out of the bunk. This is what they couldn't tolerate with the petty officers.
- Allen: They would actually throw them out of the bunk.
- Small: Yeah, the petty officers would grab their mattress and roll them right out of the bunk, you know. And I would just shake them gently and tell them to get up and most of them were very cooperative. Most of them were awake anyhow, they were just laying there.
- Allen: So you're getting up and getting dressed—you got some bathroom, toilet facilities there. How was that handled? You got one hundred and twenty five men you're trying to get through—
- Small: First come, first serve.
- Allen: Basically line up—
- Small: Well, we had, if I remember, we had ten commodes in there and seven or eight urinals. And we had all of ten or twelve wash basins. And we really never had our showers, we had I think six showers. So we really never had a conflict. If you go in there and it was busy you just waited until somebody came out and then you went in.
- Allen: These are all out in one of the barracks, right? The sleeping quarters are basically one large room.
- Small: That's right.
- Allen: And then the petty officers, where were they?
- Small: They were between the washrooms and the seamen's quarters. In other words, when you come out of the seamen's quarters, double-doors, when you came out there were two rooms on each side which was petty officers' rooms. And then beyond that were the showers and the toilets.
- Allen: How many petty officers were there for your division?
- Small: There were two.
- Allen: And they had private, separate rooms?

- Small: They had separate, private rooms, yes.
- Allen: Okay. What were the names off-hand? I think I can get it from the record.
- Small: No idea.
- Allen: Okay so at 6:45, you muster. Where? In the barracks, in front of the barracks?
- Small: No, in front of the barracks, in the street.
- Allen: In ranks.
- Small: In ranks.
- Allen: Okay and at that point the lieutenant hasn't shown up yet. Who mustered you?
- Small: The petty officer mustered us.
- Allen: The lieutenant is not present.
- Small: Sometimes he was, and sometimes he wasn't. Now, I do remember him being there on several occasions, but I don't think he was commanded to be there and muster. Because we went from muster to the mess hall.
- Allen: Okay. You marched to the mess hall.
- Small: Yes.
- Allen: Was that very nearby or—?
- Small: It was about, I would say half a block away at least.
- Allen: And you have chow at about 7:00.
- Small: Chow about 7:00.
- Allen: What's the typical breakfast like?
- Small: Well, it was usually bacon and eggs, fried eggs and bacon and toast and home fried potatoes. It was a typical breakfast. You had a choice of milk or coffee or tea. A few beverages. And sometime they had pancakes, syrup and butter and sausage. It was a typical breakfast. You had one meat and then something to go with it, eggs or pancakes, or French toast.

- Allen: What was the day like, do you remember, that day, July seventeenth?
- Small: Well, we had worked that day. The weather was beautiful.
- Allen: It was a clear day.
- Small: It was clear day. I remember that because I was a winch operator. And it was a clear day and that day I was running electric winches; the ship I worked on had electric winches.
- Allen: This is the [SS] Mormactern.
- Small: Yes and I was very proud of those electric winches, they were so much easier to handle than steam winches.
- Allen: Yeah.
- Small: And it was just like any other day, we had a tonnage quota. I don't know whether we got it or not because we never heard the results of our day's work. Only that we were so far behind the other divisions that we were awarded some kind of punishment for it. But if we excelled, we never heard anything about it.
- Allen: When you left chow and went down to the pier, how did you get down to the pier?
- Small: They had what we call cattle cars. They were trailers, pulled by a tractor, and they had long benches in there, three benches: one on each side, and one in the middle. And the cattle car usually carried about—between sixty and eighty men. And we just loaded up the cattle car and took off.
- Allen: You'd be there at 8:00. At work at 8:00.
- Small: Yes, you'd be there at 8:00.
- Allen: How did one division replace the other? What was the process? You—down there men work on a twenty-four hour, around the clock shift, so when you arrive, there's another division coming off.
- Small: That's right.
- Allen: How did that actually work?
- Small: One man just took over where another man left off. You quit, the whistle blew, and you quit and another man started.

- Allen: Okay so they didn't muster the division that was coming off and then take them all away and have you come on.
- Small: No, no.
- Allen: You actually had a one-for-one—
- Small: It's straight off. The division coming on arrived at the parking lot and then mustered in the parking lot after they got off the cattle carts. And marched to the dock. And down the dock. They usually arrived at the dock one or two minutes prior to their work time. And when the whistle blew, we quit, and they went to work. And many times I passed my relief operator, I was coming down a gangplank and he was going up. And sometimes he would be standing there waiting for the whistle to blow for me to quit. You see what I mean?
- Allen: So you knew the guy who was your relief then.
- Small: No, I didn't know him personally, I just knew he was my relief on that winch, you see what I mean. And on hole two or hole one or hole three, or whatever hole it was, I knew by him standing there, that he was the winch operator. And if I passed him coming up the gangplank I didn't know who he was. Because a lot of the fellas coming up the gangplank were right on down in the hole, they were material handlers, you know, or they were carpenters, or something down in the hole of the ship. So if I didn't actually see the man at the winch controller, I didn't know who he was.
- Allen: Okay. So that day you arrive at 8:00, you go to work and you're working on the Mormactern.
- Small: Yeah.
- Allen: You worked on the Mormactern before. And she'd been in there—in fact, she sailed that day. So she must have been there for—
- Small: There was two, the Mormactern— and, was it the Bryan?
- Allen: The [SS E.A.] Bryan. The Bryan was just about loaded, too. But—
- Small: I don't remember whether it was the Mormactern or the Bryan. I think the Bryan was loaded and ready to go to sea. And we were working on the Mormactern. It had only been in about three days.
- Allen: Well according to the records, both of them were pretty well loaded, but the Mormactern, you finished the Mormactern and in fact it sailed somewhere between one and 2:00.

- Small: Well then what was the other ship that blew up?
- Allen: The Bryan. The Bryan was the other one and it was still being loaded, it was due to sail in a few days.
- Small: Alright, but there was two ships docked there at the time of the explosion.
- Allen: Oh that night, another ship called the [SS] Quinault Victory, came in at about 6:00.
- Small: Oh that's the one.
- Allen: It was a new ship. They had just started reading it and it was empty.
- Small: We were working on the Mormactern, that's right, that's right.
- Allen: There were two ships that blew up. The Mormactern sailed that afternoon. You finished loading it and it sailed. It was still loading the Bryan and then this other one came in at six.
- Small: That's right because, when we left the dock that afternoon, the other side was empty. There was no ship there. There was no ship there, the Bryan was gone.
- Allen: No, the Bryan was still there. That's the one that blew up. The Mormactern was the one that sailed.
- Small: The Mormactern was the one—then we were working on the Bryan then. If the Mormactern sailed, she was loaded.
- Allen: Well, that's what I wanted to clear up, because according to the records I've seen, the Fourth Division worked on the Mormactern, finished loading the Mormactern, and she sailed at about somewhere between 1:00 and 2:00. And then another ship came and—not until 6:00, though. The Quinault Victory. And they started working on it. Meanwhile the Bryan was there the whole time and was being loaded.
- Small: That means we quit work early that day and I don't remember that. I don't remember that, I don't remember quitting work early that day. The explosion was around twenty minutes after 10:00 that night. I don't remember quitting work early that day.
- Allen: Well in other situations when a ship finished loading in the middle of a shift, what would they do? Do you continue working on the pier or do you just quit work?

- Small: Well we didn't quit work, that is definite—we must have been policing the pier or we went to work, we went on the other ship helping load the other ship. We may have went to work on the other ship because now, I know the ship I was working on going down the docks, the ship I was working on was on the right hand side. The ship that sailed was on the left hand side going down the dock. And both ships was headed back this way, in other words when we came down the dock we approached the ship from the bow head.
- Allen: Yeah, right.
- Small: Now, I don't remember which ship was on the right hand side of the dock. I don't know which ship it was. It must have been the Mormactern, though. Because I remember the Mormactern and the Bryan. The Quinault Victory, I don't remember that—
- Allen: You wouldn't have even seen it.
- Small: No. Because that came in that night, that's the one I didn't remember, but I remember the Mormactern and the Bryan.
- Allen: Okay.
- Small: And the Mormactern was the one that sailed.
- Allen: Right. So it was on the—
- Small: If we were working the ship on the right hand side of the dock. So that must have been the Mormactern, so the Bryan sailed from the seaward side of the dock. When you walk down the dock this way, the sea was on the left hand side, right. And then the ship on the right hand side was inland, it was the inland side of the dock and the ship on the left hand side was on the seaward side of the dock, or on the pier rather. We were working on the right hand side of the pier, on the ship inside of the pier. That was the Mormactern because the Bryan sailed from the seaward side of the pier.
- Allen: Okay. Somewhere I have a diagram of where the ships were placed, I'll look at that and see where the Quinault Victory was and that must be where the Mormactern was. The ship that sailed was the Mormactern because the Bryan was the one that blew up.
- Small: Alright, so the Mormactern sailed from the inland side of the dock, that's right.
- Allen: The Quinault Victory must have come in and replaced it—

- Small: Yeah, the Quinault Victory came around from the {seawhich?} side and came inland side of the dock. It had to be.
- Allen: Okay.
- Small: I have to sit down and take my mind over that forty years ago. There's a lot of remembering to do, but there's documents and things that were buried up in here.
- Allen: So you came off duty. In any case, you worked a full shift, you didn't come off early.
- Small: We worked a full shift, yes.
- Allen: Okay because that's what wasn't clear to me, I know this ship had supposedly sailed between one and two and normally you didn't quit work until four.
- Small: That's right.
- Allen: So I wasn't clear whether you came off early—you stayed on—you did a full shift—
- Small: No, we did a full shift so we must have either policed the dock or else went to work on the Bryan .
- Allen: Okay. So you came off duty, off the shift, at 4:00, as usual.
- Small: Uhuh.
- Allen: Okay, what was the rest of the day like then until that night?
- Small: Well we usually went back to the barracks and we did our toilet duties and then went to chock. Chow was at 5:00 or 5:15. They serve chow I think from 5:00 to 6:30. We had any time in there to go after. And then after chow, if we had liberty we went to shore, and if we didn't have liberty we went back to the barracks and amused ourselves in the barracks.
- Allen: What happened that—did you have liberty?
- Small: No, I didn't have liberty.
- Allen: So you stayed in the barracks.
- Small: I stayed in the barracks, I stayed in the barracks and I guess I wrote letters, that was my main occupation.

- Allen: Okay, so you didn't go to Pittsburg then.
- Small: No.
- Allen: Somewhere I had gotten the impression that you actually had liberty that evening and gone over to Pittsburg.
- Small: I don't think so.
- Allen: Not the case.
- Small: I don't think so. I couldn't have went to Pittsburg because if I had had liberty that night, I wouldn't have been on the base at 10:30 when it blew up. You see what I mean. Because when we went on liberty, we usually just did make the last bus from Pittsburg coming back. Because I left at 1:00 and in no way did I go on liberty and come back ahead of time. So if I had went on liberty that night, I wouldn't have been there when the explosion happened.
- Allen: Well it didn't make sense, when I read it over again, it didn't make sense to me for just that reason. If you had gone on liberty, you wouldn't have come back.
- Small: No, I wouldn't have been back there by 10:30.
- Allen: Yeah, something like that. So you must have stayed on base, in the barracks, write letters—
- Small: I did, I did. I'm almost positive I did because of that fact that if I had went on liberty I wouldn't have been there.
- Allen: Yeah. Now, lights out was usually, what, 10:00?
- Small: 10:00.
- Allen: Okay so everybody was in bed, then, by—
- Small: Everybody was in bed and well, not necessarily, we didn't have to be in bed, but the lights went out at 10:00. If he wanted to sit around the table, they had a table at one end of the barracks, like a picnic table, there were benches around it. If you wanted to sit at the table and read by a flashlight or something like that, they didn't bother you, but the barrack lights went out at 10:00.
- Allen: Mhm. And you were actually in bed.
- Small: I was in bed, yes.

- Allen: Were you asleep or—
- Small: No, I wasn't asleep. I heard both explosions. I wasn't asleep, but I didn't know what the first one was. And the second one just disintegrated the barracks, that's the one that—that picked me up off the block and I had my mattress like this and I flipped it over and I hit the floor with the mattress on top of me. I remember that specifically. And the glass and the debris and stuff that fell hit the mattress rather than hitting me. And I think I got one little cut of glass, a minor cut, I forget now even where it was. But that's why I escaped injury in the explosion, but the barracks were disintegrated, fellas was cut and bleeding all over the place. God spared me in it.
- Allen: Mhm. Well after that, after the two blasts, then you come outside and help some of the other men—.
- Small: I help some of the other men that were injured, one fella I gave my shoes, his feet was bleeding, I gave my slippers to him, his feet were bleeding profusely and he couldn't walk, his feet were bleeding so bad, he couldn't walk. There was no medics or anything around. This was about ten or fifteen minutes after the explosion. And there was no medication or anything around, no doctors, nothing. And I gave him my shoes. Another fella, I wrapped his arm. He had a cut all the way down his arm. And I wrapped his arm, I put a tourniquet on it to try to stop it from bleeding, try to control the bleeding. Several fellas I helped out because I wasn't hurt. And, I don't know, that's—it was chaos, I'll tell you that much.
- Allen: Where were the petty officers?
- Small: God only knows. I don't think either one of them was on duty at that time, I don't think either one of them was there. I don't remember seeing either one of them.
- Allen: And Delucchi wasn't around either.
- Small: And Delucchi wasn't around either.
- Allen: Yeah, he would have been over with the white officers.
- Small: Yeah.
- Allen: Did you go down to the pier?
- Small: No, I never did get down to the pier, they—
- Allen: So you never saw—

- Small: Never saw the aftermath of the explosion.
- Allen: So, okay, explosion is at 10:20. You're helping enginemen for the next, what, when do you actually leave the barracks area and move out?
- Small: Well I can't say exactly, I'd imagine about a good hour and a half or two hours after the explosion before we were asked to load onto these cattle cars and I think they took us to Vallejo. I even forget that now, where they took us, from there. It was a good hour and a half or two hours after the explosion before we were moved out.
- Allen: Okay. And you never came back to Port Chicago after that, is that correct?
- Small: I did return, but that was oh years later.
- Allen: No, I mean within the next—before the time of the worst times. Okay, so you get moved out to the other base and you're there up until August 9, I think. What kind of duty did you have in that period?
- Small: None.
- Allen: There was no ship loading, so what was going on?
- Small: None, we had no duties whatsoever.
- Allen: How'd you spend your day?
- Small: Our time was free, we couldn't go off the base. We were confined to the base, but our time, we had no duties whatsoever, nothing to do. Nothing whatsoever to do.
- Allen: How did you pass the time?
- Small: Reading. Writing letters. Talking to each other. Playing cards, playing poker, playing {inaudible}, anything we could do to pass the time.
- Allen: But you were confined to the base.
- Small: We were confined to the base, yes.
- Allen: Did you have any expectations you were going to be sent back to ammunition loading? What was the general expectation?
- Small: Well we expected to be, to have to return to duty because that was the only thing we knew to do. And since we weren't qualified seamen we had no expectations about going to sea, you know. We weren't cooks,

we weren't bakers, we weren't stewards, the only thing we knew was handling ammunition. And we fully expected to be asked to go back to the same work. And the men had made up their mind themselves that they weren't going to do it. That was the general situation. They got me involved in it only because the officer directed his question to me. If he had not called any particular name, I would never have been involved in it in that respect. But he said, "Small, front and center. Will you return to duty?" And I said, "No." And then someone over in the ranks said, "If Small don't go, we ain't going either." And that put me out in front of it, but had he never directed his question to me, I would have never been involved in it.

- Allen: After that happened—okay, and then all the men are taken over to the barge and kept on the barge for several days. Then later that's the interrogation, where they bring each man in and talk to them, and ask them about what happened and so forth. And then later that's the men are held in imprisonment before the trial. You were put in solitary confinement. Do you remember that?
- Small: Well, I guess you call it solitary confinement, it wasn't all that solitary. I was separated from the other men.
- Allen: Okay.
- Small: But I mean, solitary confinement usually brings to mind a dark hole with one little window in it, and, you know, bread and water, it wasn't to that extent. But I was separated from the other men.
- Allen: What was that like? What was the physical set up there, when you were held before the trial?
- Small: Well, let me see if I can remember that. I remember being separated from the men. But I don't remember the layout of the situation. I remember them coming and calling me out, taking me out and putting me in a separate compartment. But I can't recall, I can't get a picture of that compartment, what it was or where it was. Or what it was like. Maybe it'll return to me after I think about it a little bit. I can't get any picture of it, of what it was. I know they accuse me of being the leader of a mutinous assembly. And they separated me from the rest of the men, but how they did it, I don't remember.
- Allen: Okay. After the trial, and you shipped down to San Pedro, Mare Island down there, what was that like? What was the physical set up down there, do you remember?
- Small: It was a communal situation. All of us, well we were mixed with the other men. The fifty of us that were shipped to Mare Island were

separated into groups of five or six. Each group was put into different barracks, you see what I mean? So there was five or six of us in with maybe seventy five or eighty other prisoners. See what I mean?

Allen: Is this the integrated facility or are these segregated?

Small: No, it was segregated. With all blacks. It was integrated later on, some whites came in, but when we first got there, it was all black. This was—[wife enters conversation]. There was white fellas in there, they started to come in after we got there. White fellas, they started to move white prisoners in. And they were put in with us, but there was no racial conflict that I can remember between us.

Allen: Okay, then at the end of it, when you were shipped out, put on the ship and shipped out, you were shipped out with four or five other men, do you remember who they were? Were they the same men you had been with all along?

Small: No They weren't the same men that I was in the barracks with. They were all "PC [Port Chicago] men" as we were referred to. But they weren't the same men that was barracks with me, no.

Allen: So that was a different group.

Small: It was a different group.

Allen: And they were with you throughout their entire time you were in the Pacific.

Small: Yeah.

Allen: And you all came back together to Seattle.

Small: Seattle, Washington, that's right. I don't even remember who they were. Wideman was one of them.

Allen: Wideman was one of them! [laughs]

Small: Wideman was one of them. I remember Wideman, he was one of them. Charles Grey was another one.

Allen: Did Wideman ever straighten up? Straighten out?

Small: No, but the last incident we had with Wideman—let me see if I can get that straightened out, we were at the old—we were stationed at the Kaiser shipyard, the old Kaiser shipyard in Vancouver, Washington. And we used to pull liberty in Portland, Oregon. That was just across

the line. And something Wideman did, I just can't remember now, but it was concerning a woman. I don't remember exactly—it'll come back to my memory. He was {inaudible}—short sheets, one of the later things he did that night was that he put that paper in the heater. That was outstanding, someone may have gotten hurt that night just because of his practical joke. He tore the door off the back of the barracks and everything just because he wanted to get a laugh.

Allen: That was the type of fella he was, you know. Well, okay, thank you very much. As I said, as I get further along with the writing, I may have other questions. Is it alright if I call you?

Small: Sure, sure, call me any time. If I can answer them, I will. It's been forty years and sometimes it's pretty hard to go back that—