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University of California
Berkeley, California

Charles Snipes:
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2008

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Interview #1: 08-19-2008

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01-00:00:00

Rigelhaupt: It is June 19, 2008. I'm in Berkeley, California doing an oral history interview with Charles L. Snipes. This is tape number one. To start, if I could ask you to say your full name and the year you were born.

01-00:00:19

Snipes: Okay. My name is Charles L. Snipes and I was born in 1925.

01-00:00:27

Rigelhaupt: And since the focus of the interview is going to be on the Oakland Army Base, I would like to ask you if you could describe your first experience at the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:00:39

Snipes: My first experience at the Oakland Army Base is when I was transferred out here from Boston. The commanding officer had come to the commander and I. We had depleted our company in Boston and so they sent us out here to form a new company. So we both were assigned to the Oakland Army Base and we subsequently received personnel to fill up the company to about 200 men. We stationed that at the Oakland Army Base there and our responsibility was as a transportation port company. Our experience there was to assist the port and the operations in offloading and loading of ships handling military cargo.

01-00:01:43

Rigelhaupt: When you say you were transferred to the Oakland Army Base with a commanding officer, were you in the service at the time?

01-00:01:29

Snipes: I was in the service at the time, yes. I was in service at the time, yeah. I was the first sergeant and the company commander was the captain.

01-00:01:58

Rigelhaupt: And what branch of the service were you in?

01-00:02:00

Snipes: The Army, the United States Army.

01-00:02:03

Rigelhaupt: So you were, you said, first sergeant?

01-00:02:04

Snipes: Mmm-hmm.

01-00:02:05

Rigelhaupt:

First sergeant in the Army. Was that part of a larger company or battalion? Forgive me, I've not been in the service so I don't know if I'm using the proper terminology, but how did it break down within the Army?

01-00:02:21

Snipes:

A company is the lowest element in the organizational structure. It takes four companies, five companies to make up a battalion.

01-00:02:42

Rigelhaupt:

Your company at the Oakland Army Base, was it part of a larger battalion that was stationed in a different base? Where did the command structure go up?

01-00:02:56

Snipes:

It was a single company and there were no battalions at the Oakland Army Base at that time. We were the only transportation company that was there and our company had to strength of 250 men. It was five officers. The company commander came out and we got the necessary personnel to fill up the company. After we got the company up to strength, we started training. It was a transportation port company and all of these men had gone through advanced training down in New Orleans at Fort Polk on transportation operation—operating ships and unloading and loading ships and that nature. So they came here qualified to do the job. We just had to organize them and put them in different teams so they can service the ships and the port.

01-00:03:59

Rigelhaupt:

And what year did you first arrive at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:04:02

Snipes:

It was in 1945.

01-00:04:13

Rigelhaupt:

Was World War II still going on when you still arrived?

01-00:04:20

Snipes:

Right, right. After we finished our advanced training down in Fort Polk... Well, first of all, when I was drafted, I was sent to Fort Benning. This was in 1942. As I was processing at the reception center, they pulled out people to test their skills and abilities and so forth. When they found out that I could type eighty five words to a minute—correct words per minute—they took me out of that line and gave me a job. They assigned me right then at that day to the {enchants allotment?} section. Then, in 1943, the WAC (that's Women's Army Corps) came in. The Army had been training the women to take the men's jobs so they could release the man to go fight, and so they transferred a battalion of WAC into Fort Benning and then we was transferred down at Fort Polk, Louisiana to take our advanced training. After advanced training, we in route to Korea and we got to a New York port and they had a strike up and down the East Coast. They pulled five battalions out and we took over the ports. I was transferred up to Boston, we took over the Boston port. We moved the military cargo. After that, the war was ended and they shifted the

men to different places. We came out then to prepare for a movement in the Pacific. So that's how I came to the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:06:15

Rigelhaupt: What were your first impressions of the base, if you could describe how it looked, physically?

01-00:06:26

Snipes: The Oakland Army Base was a very, very impressive assignment, facilities-wise and location-wise. It was one of garden spots of the military assignment. I certainly did not have any regrets for coming to California. I was very pleased to come to the Oakland Army Base. Our facilities were very nice and all the people that I had contact with were very, very cordial. The company commander and I went up and met the Army base commander and we had a good relationship. When we got our operation there, then we started performing our jobs. The Oakland Army Base was a terminal, a port terminal. All the military supplies and material and equipment going to the Pacific area came through the Oakland Army Base. It was our responsibility to assist with the loading of the ships. At that time, they didn't have any containers. It was loose cargo going on the ship and so we were loading the ships with equipment and cargo because military cargo then was real critical to get through the port and get to its destination.

01-00:08:06

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember exactly what month you came to the Oakland Army Base in '45?

01-00:08:10

Snipes: I know it was the summertime. I think it was probably around June, July. In that kind of time frame.

01-00:08:24

Rigelhaupt: So that was only a month or two months before the war ended and the atomic bombs were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

01-00:08:30

Snipes: Right, right, right.

01-00:08:35

Rigelhaupt: As you began your service at the Army base, did you already have a sense that the war was winding down or did you and your company have a sense that you were going to be shipping war supplies to the Pacific for many years to come?

01-00:08:53

Snipes: At that time, we didn't know anything about the bomb. We, at that time, thought we were going to be there for a long time. What I was blessed, then was that we were headed for Korea. It was five ships. They pulled off five battalions and then they assigned them along the East Coast. That saved me from going to Korea and also, it saved me from going to Europe. We were

headed to Europe and then the war came to an end. So then, when they assigned me to Boston, a lot of the people that I knew in the companies that went on, they didn't come back. I was kind of glad. What always happens to my life side {inaudible} didn't get a chance to go to Europe. But then, when we got ready to go to Japan, we were headed for Korea. After we left home—I guess I was the Army base then. I got married on June 30 and about two weeks after I got married, I was on my way to Japan, on my way to Korea. About midways, a lot of the situation was changing in Japan. They needed more troops. But then, instead of going to Korea, half the ship — people were changed assignments and went to Japan. I was fortunate about that. I didn't have a chance to go to Korea. I ended up in the depot at Japan in Kokura.

01-00:11:02

Rigelhaupt: So you did go Korea?

01-00:11:04

Snipes: In Japan, we were in direct support of the Korean operation. My trip to Korea was liaison because I knew I was going a couple days and coming back.

01-00:11:20

Rigelhaupt: When you first got to the Oakland Army Base, did you actually live on the base?

01-00:011:27

Snipes: Yeah, I lived on the base. We had five buildings there that the troops were housed in at the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:011:41

Rigelhaupt: So, five buildings. About how many troops altogether were living on the base?

01-00:11:48

Snipes: I think the Oakland Army Base had about 2,000 troops on the base and we were just part of the segment.

01-00:12:06

Rigelhaupt: The 2,000 that were on the base were all active?

01-00:12:14

Snipes: Active duty, yes. All active duty. And all transportation-type.

01-00:12:19

Rigelhaupt: Were there also Civil Service workers?

01-00:12:21

Snipes: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Civil Service, though, I guess they must have had at that time about 3,000 Civil Service workers. They actually were the key people in operating the port.

01-00:12:44

Rigelhaupt:

And then there were also workers from the International Longshore Warehouse Union that were not part of the Civil Service but were essentially contract workers.

01-00:12:56

Snipes:

That's right. You're too young to remember Bridges, but Bridges was head of the Longshoreman's union. He's the one that created that strike along the East Coast and he didn't want us to work with the operation on the Pacific Coast, either. He got overruled on that. I don't know, I guess he's got some commander that told him where the bear was. We had no problem with working the ships. Unfortunately, sometimes we got the late shifts, but that was okay.

01-00:13:38

Rigelhaupt:

So about 2,000 active duty, 3,000 or so in the Civil Service. How many other workers were on the base when you first got there in 1945?

01-00:013:54

Snipes:

I'd say about 2,000 troops there. It was at least 2,000. I'd say 2 to 3,000 troops and then a lot of civilians. At least 3,000 or so civilians. They were the mainstay of the operation. So you had the Oakland Army Base and then you had the San Francisco Presidio. That was all part of this military operation. They had troops over there, too.

01-00:014:42

Rigelhaupt:

This was a busy base.

01-00:14:44

Snipes:

Oh yeah, oh yeah. They would have, sometimes, about maybe eight or ten ships a day.

01-00:14:59

Rigelhaupt:

Did operations run twenty four hours a day?

01-00:15:01

Snipes:

Oh yeah. In any port where you have ships, it's a twenty four-hour operation. They don't stop for daytime, they don't stop for nighttime. When those ships come in, it's a twenty four-hour operation until you either get it unloaded or loaded.

01-00:15:18

Rigelhaupt:

And it might be hard to really quantify, but what were some of the main items in the cargo moving through the Oakland Army Base when you first got there?

01-00:15:32

Snipes:

There was all kind of equipment, like tanks and truck and vehicles. Cargo. Things for subsistence, the food items. Items that you have for other livelihoods, like furniture and desk and desk and that kind of stuff. But the

general thing that you would have in a normal military operation—a supply operation, that's what we had sent through the port. At that time, it was all boxed up and crated. They didn't know anything at that time about any containerization. That wasn't even in the picture.

01-00:016:42

Rigelhaupt:

Did the Oakland Army Base ever move weapons through?

01-00:16:28

Snipes:

Oh yeah, weapons came through too. Weapons came through too. Small arms and some of the big ground pieces like the Howitzers, {nozzle kits} came through, yes. Whatever the strength and whatever the equipment for the unit that was going, that is what we shipped through. When they moved the unit, they moved all the equipment they'd need to fight. That includes the tanks, the guns, the munitions and the men. They had then what they called Liberty ships. Kaiser came up early in the war with some cement ships and they used those for transporting men and equipment. That was a good, expedient operation as far as the military was concerned, with the Kaiser ships. That was a good thing. The Liberty ships, there were plenty of those. Each had five hatches. When you got the cargo loaded on the ship, then that ship took off. Then it was somebody else's problem to safeguard it and guard it so it wouldn't get torpedoed.

01-00:17:48

Rigelhaupt:

Could you walk me through how you loaded a Liberty ship?

01-00:17:53

Snipes:

There are five hatches and there are winch operators. In our company, I think we had ten teams. The team consists of two to five, depending on how many winches was working that night. If you had five winches, then you had one man operating the winch per shift. So that would be five men operating the winches. The winch is what they use to load the ship, pick up the cargo on the dock on palettes and bring it aboard the ship and then they take it off the palettes and stack it up inside the ship. When they get that hatch loaded, they close it off and then they start more cargo. Each ship has five holes, or five hatches. Depending on the type of cargo.

Hazardous cargo had to be separated from the general cargo. Hazardous cargo like ammunition and explosives and gasses — all gasses are classified, like oxygen isn't a dangerous gas. But if you get acetylene, that's an explosive-type gas. You couldn't mix the gasses up, they had to be separated. So all the hazardous material had to be separated by categories then loaded separately on the ship.

When you got those hatches full, that ship then was ready to go. You button it up there, close it up, put the covers on it, then it's ready to sail. It would take you about maybe three days to load a ship, day and night. The Army base had five piers.

01-00:20:02

Rigelhaupt:

Could you walk me through a typical day for you in the first few months that you began your service at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:20:16

Snipes:

The first few days, after we got the men coming in, we had to get the place all set up. The facilities was there. We had our own dining hall—a mess hall, we called it in the Army. We had six cooks and then there was a sergeant in charge of the dining hall. We had our own cooks. The cooks came in first and the men started coming in after that. Then, once we got up to 250 men, that was our company strength, we started then training the men and getting them organized into what they were supposed to do on the ships. Then they were assigned to do the various tasks.

01-00:21:35

Rigelhaupt:

And a day for you—how early would it start? Could you walk me through what a normal day would have been like for you?

01-00:21:45

Snipes:

The troops would get up at Reveille. We'd call it Reveille to wake them up, you know? Then we'd have muster to see who all is present. From that, they'd start and feed them from about 6:00 to 7:00. They'd go to the dining hall and eat. Then they'd come back and clean up their barracks area. Around 8:00 or so they'd be out for assembly. And then from there we'd take on our various tasks. Early, when the company was just getting associated, it was mostly training because once you get into the operational phase of it, the men had already been technically trained but we had to get acquainted with the ships and acquainted with the working environments. My job as first sergeant was to make sure that all the people was there and that they were ready to go and that officers were assigned. On each ship, we had an officer assigned to that. We had five officers in the company. As the first sergeant, we took care of all the administrative functions in the company and made sure that all the tasks were performed and ensured the fact that the training was done.

But the Army base was a real nice assignment. That's where I first met my wife after I was there for four years.

01-00:24:00

Rigelhaupt:

Now how did the Army base change after the end of World War II?

01-00:24:04

Snipes:

After World War II, the changes occurred very gradually. The thrust of the movement of the materials went down and the number of troops passing through went down. It was nothing to have ships leaving Fort Mason almost three or four times a week loaded down with troops. But that movement subsided.

Later on, the Army base was the headquarters for all the material that went to the Pacific areas. It was just a staging area for all the materials going to

support the troops that they had in place and that was a big chore all by itself. All the heavy cargo—they didn't have as much of that. But the maintenance material and everything that the people need came through the Oakland Army Base. We were their lifeline. That was still going on after the war.

Then, later on, the movement of material changed and they came in through with containers. And then they moved into the containerization. The department of the Feds, then, they got what they called a MEALVAN. That was the Army's concept of a container. It was much smaller than the commercial ones. They would stuff the cargo into those containers and you shipped it by the containers. That cut down the pilferage. Containerization cut down on the pilferage not only through the military cargo movement but also for the commercials too. In the commercial area, that cut the pilferage down to almost nil. Material came in in containers and they didn't have no choice of picking over and stealing it. That cut that part out and that was very good.

All the material going through the port now is in containers. The only thing that's going bulk is what you can not get in a container. That's like equipment and car vehicles and trucks and so forth. They go as they are. But everything else. If you can get it in a container, you put it in a container. That simplifies the movement. You take a ship now, depending on the size of it, most of the ships carry anywhere from 1,500 to 3,000 containers. That's a lot of cargo.

01-00:27:33

Rigelhaupt: Now did I hear correctly, MEALVANS?

01-00:27:36

Snipes: That's what they called it.

01-00:27:40

Rigelhaupt: When did they start using those at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:27:42

Snipes: It must have been about 1953 or '54, right around that area. They didn't have many but they did have some. As a matter of fact, the military VAN was the first one to come into that container concept. It wasn't long after that that all the commercial ones started that same process but on their own system. They had their own containers built. The military was Army green [laughter].

01-00:28:41

Rigelhaupt: One of the things that I'd heard about the Oakland Army Base was that it was able to utilize intermodal transit early on so trains would come more or less right into the base.

01-00:28:53

Snipes: Right up to port, yeah. With the intermodal, you had the trains, the trucks and also the ships. All of those made up the intermodal process. That's what they're using today to expand the logistics and to refine the logistical support. All of the steamship companies now have trucks coming into the port and they

have it going into the air terminals. They combine those. Where there is no air support or destination, then the ships go. Matson is a good one. They almost guarantee that can set your clock. Matson maintain a regular schedule of sailing. Their ships are very seldom late on departure and arriving.

Johnson Island, we were sending material out there, my company was working for the Department of Energy. We had 500 people at Johnson Island. That was a key point for experimentation. At the Army base for five years, we participated in the atomic testing in the Pacific. For five years, we had 19 ships that, starting from the second engineering special brigade in Seattle, would train up and down the coast line and end up in San Diego. They picked up the Marines at the Marine base there and went to the Pacific.

For six years, every six months they'd spend six months at Anawetok, Christmas Island, doing the atomic testing. And never will forget the first one that I was exposed to. They had an atmospheric testing. When they exploded the device, the hot air was rushing in the fill that vacuum and we felt it. We had protection on. We felt that hot air coming across to fill in the vacuum where that bomb had exploded and sucked out all the fresh air going and the air was coming in to fill that void. We felt that. They had the mushroom clouds.

For six years, we participated in that each year. We spend most of our time at Anawetok. That was our home base. Johnson Island was the control island for all the testing. Anawetok and Johnson Island were quite close together. One of the islands was Christmas Island and it used to be there but after one of the underground explosions, it's no longer there.

One of the years, we started cleaning up the waste, but they contracted that out. Holmes and Narver was one of the companies that handled that process. At Anawetok, they cut off part of the island and entombed it, really. All of the atomic waste that was accumulated on that island, they entombed it in an area that never will be open any more to human people because the radiation there has such a long lifetime.

01-00:33:02

Rigelhaupt:

So your involvement with atomic testing—were you still in the Army?

01-00:33:05

Snipes:

Yeah.

01-00:33:08

Rigelhaupt:

Would you ship out from the Oakland Army Base to the island for?

01-00:33:14

Snipes:

Six months and then we'd come back.

01-00:33:19

Rigelhaupt:

Now what were some of the things that you did in the Pacific? Could you describe some of your job duties while you were in the Pacific?

01-00:33:26

Snipes:

We supported the atomic testing. We facilitated that. During the time of the testing, all the personal—we had ships there—they would leave the island, get aboard the ship, and the ship would sail away in a safe zone. If it was going to be an atmospheric testing, they would do that. If it was underground or it was ground level testing, whichever they wanted to do, that would be done. During that time, they were processing many material that was going to the test site for the testing. They also had people there in support of the testing. Our position was in support.

That's where I met Holmes and Narver. They were the prime contractor for the Department of Energy and they were in charge of all the testing. When I got out of the service, they had an office in Oakland. I sent them my resume and told them I'd like to come out and talk to them about a job. I went out three days later and they hired me. I worked for that company for 26 years right at the Oakland Army Base. That's how we had contact with Oakland Army Base. All our material went through the Oakland Army Base. We booked our material through the Oakland Army Base. All the ships left from the Oakland Army Base. Now I'm out of the service and I'm a civilian and I still had to contact them.

01-00:35:33

Rigelhaupt:

The company you were working for—would you mind spelling it?

01-00:35:37

Snipes:

H-O-L-M-E-S and Narver, N-A-R-V-E-R. It's an engineering/construction company and was a contractor for the Department of Energy and they managed all of their testing in the Pacific Area.

01-00:35:56

Rigelhaupt:

Did any atomic weapons go through the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:35:57

Snipes:

If it did, you didn't know about it. We didn't really know if none of them went through there.

01-00:36:13

Rigelhaupt:

Well that's certainly what I've heard. That many of the more dangerous and heavy munitions did not go through the Oakland Army Base. That Concord had more heavy...

01-00:36:22

Snipes:

Concord had more heavy weapons. More sophisticated-type weapons. The Army base, they were allowed certain categories of ammunition. They could handle the small arms, but that was about all that went through the Oakland Army Base. You go to Concord, that's a different story. That's why the Army

base, after they closed the Army base, they moved the operation then to Concord. And that's where it still is today, the 834th Transportation Battalion. They are the military arm that operates the weapons station now and that's where the Army carries on part of its operation. They still have a ship-loading capacity and they take the people now and take them to the ship instead of ships coming here. The ships mostly load up—I think they have about two or three ships that come into the port in Oakland where they load them, but most of those are now loaded in San Diego and down in that area.

01-00:37:42

Rigelhaupt:

When you first came on during World War II or the tail end of the war, was it significantly more cargo than troops moving through the base?

01-00:37:57

Snipes:

It was more cargo than troops, but there was a significant amount of troops that were moving through because most of the troops went off by ship. They would leave right from Fort Mason and that's where I left from. It was more cargo than troops. There was cargo all over that Oakland Army Base. They had five piers and sometimes they had five ships in at the one time and they would load them. After the war was over, that mission kind of tailed off. They had two commands—the East Coast command and the West Coast command. The East Coast controlled everything that went to Europe and the West Coast controlled everything that went to the Pacific. The Oakland Army Base MOTBA and then they changed it to a couple other names. I think the last one was MOTBA but they had several other changes. They were trying to reorganize it and refine the operations.

01-00:39:36

Rigelhaupt:

One of the other things I've heard is that troops who died in battle also came back through. The caskets came back through the Oakland Army Base. In other interviews, that was described during the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Was that also true during World War II?

01-00:40:00

Snipes:

Yeah, yeah. That was also true during World War II. One time, you knew about it then, when President Bush came to office—that was after the war, though—he kind of put a non-publicity on that fact of returning. On the returns, you kind of will see how statistics will pay out for you as far as what the casualties of it are. It's quite a respected, dignified service when the remains return. But they're still coming through. Sometimes you don't know about it, but they're there.

01-00:41:03

Rigelhaupt:

Did that have an effect on you or the other troops stationed at the Oakland Army Base, seeing soldiers' caskets coming home?

01-00:41:12

Snipes:

It had an effect, yeah. But you were there to do a job and you accept the fact that somebody was going to get killed and somebody is going to have to come

home. We'd rather see them come home walking than lying, but that's a fact of life and that's a situation that you deal with in a combat situation, in a wartime situation.

01-00:41:51

Rigelhaupt: Were you still in active duty in the Army when the Korean War began? Still stationed at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:42:01

Snipes: Yeah. I was stationed in Japan. I was on my way to Korea and then we got reassigned on the ship. I left Oakland Army Base and went on my way to Korea but then the war situation changed in Japan and they shifted the soldiers from the assignments midway through the voyage. About half the people on that ship went to Japan instead of going to Korea. I was part of the group that went to Japan. I was kind of glad of that. I don't have any misfortunes in not going to Korea, but I certainly had some good experiences in going to Japan.

01-00:43:14

Rigelhaupt: Before you left the Oakland Army Base, did you see a buildup in troops and materials going through the base in anticipation of the Korean War?

01-00:43:29

Snipes: Oh yeah, oh yeah. There was always a buildup on that. At the Oakland Army Base and Navy Supply Center and at Fort Mason, there was a tremendous amount of cargo that was moving through. The troop movement kind of trailed off but the cargo was still there.

01-00:44:06

Rigelhaupt: How closely integrated was the Oakland Army Base with the Naval Supply Center?

01-00:44:16

Snipes: They were right next door. There were some ships that came into the Navy Supply Center. The Navy Supply Center had four piers. The personnel at the Navy Supply Center, they handled the ships that came into the Navy Supply Center but, transportation-wise, if a ship was directed into the Navy Supply Center, then personnel from Oakland Army Base did not go over to unload those ships. The military sea lift command, when they directed ships into the Oakland Army Base, the Army base then handled those ships. They were closely connected, but they did not have any reciprocity of exchanging personnel.

01-00:45:24

Rigelhaupt: Did you ever have a sense that the work that you were doing at the Oakland Army Base was dangerous?

01-00:45:35

Snipes: Well, you don't look at it that way. At least I didn't look at the fact that it was dangerous. It was something that you had to do. I think the work at the Oakland Army Base was quite safe. But you're participating in a wartime

situation. I don't consider that it was dangerous. I know that there were circumstances that you face, but the actual danger at the Oakland Army Base was nonexistent, I think. They didn't let the protestors come on the base so you didn't have to worry about that. The only thing was when the Longshoremen went on a strike, then our company was then thrust into the movement of military cargo on the same pier that the people were striking. That was depending on how Bridges wanted his people to show their strength and show their force. We didn't have any adverse activity from the civilian longshoremen and the military people that were doing the job to move the military cargo. We did not move any cargo that was not military.

01-00:47:22

Rigelhaupt:

How often did those strikes come up or any issues where you had to move the military cargo while a strike was going on the waterfront?

01-00:47:36

Snipes:

I only remember one, and it must have been about one or two but not more than that. On the East Coast, it was about the same thing because Bridges had the Longshoremen on the East Coast as well. It was about the same number. But the West Coast, I think, was more fortunate than the East Coast because they had transportation companies that could relieve them and they had trained men that could come in and do that. If they had a strike someplace, they'd throw in a couple companies there and after a day or so, they'd have that port operational.

01-00:48:30

Rigelhaupt:

How would you talk about the connections between the Oakland Army Base and West Oakland community in, say, the 1940s? Were a lot of people that lived in West Oakland working on the Oakland Army Base? How integrated where they?

01-00:48:50

Snipes:

The Oakland Army Base supported the civilian population that was working at the Oakland Army Base. Most of the people lived in West Oakland. A lot of people did not, but most of the people came from West Oakland. That's why the Oakland Army Base was such a vital source for the community because of the fact that employed a lot of the people there. When they shifted that military presence from the Oakland Army Base to Concord, it was a real blow to West Oakland. But it was not as severe because Concord is not that far. A lot of the same people just moved on over there. But they had a real rich source of labor from the West Oakland area and I would think that the total of Oakland was benefited by the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:49:57

Rigelhaupt:

What year did you leave active duty in the military and you said you joined an engineering/construction company?

01-00:50:04

Snipes:

I retired in 1963, October. I thought I'd rest up awhile but I guess the first part of '64, I got interested and went to get my job. I started working in 1964 with Holmes and Narver. I worked with them 26 years after that. That was a very good company. They're still in existence today, too. They lost a contract in Johnson Island where Raytheon was the successful bidder. But the contract was such that the contract was with the Department of Energy. It didn't make any difference which management company was on board. The employees stayed the same. In 1990, Holmes and Narver lost the contract and Raytheon won it. Raytheon had it for six years. When it came up again, Raytheon bid and Holmes and Narver bid again. Raytheon lost it after that time. Holmes and Narver won it back.

But the scope. I had the management and transportation and logistics for the West Coast for Holmes and Narver. We had 16 people in my office in Oakland. We had our office located at the Navy Supply and we dealt every day with the Oakland Army Base. When that situation changed and they moved out, then all the people there went to another location.

When Holmes and Narver won the contract, they had a different scope. They wanted all the logistics to be handled by the military. My office before was totally responsible for the logistics at all the sites. I made liaison visits to Johnson Island, Kwajalein, Anawetok, checking on our service response abilities and to ensure the fact that they were getting what they wanted and to ensure that our operation was functioning.

We had one of the best offices, I think, in the whole Department of Defense program because we also handled the hazardous material. We shipped by air, land and sea. Each one of them had a different criteria, particularly to move the hazardous cargo. We did our air through Travis Air Force base. I had six inspectors and all of them were certified to qualify hazardous cargo. They would do that and there was cargo coming into Travis or into Holmes and Narver's office in Oakland. Sometimes it would come in by air, but we were certified. If we wanted to ship something commercial air, they were qualified to certify that, too. It was a very good assignment. We had no problem when the inspectors came by from the Department of Defense. Our office always passed. We had more qualified inspectors physically doing the work than any other source that we had under the Department of Energy.

I believed in training. I made sure that everybody got trained, was qualified and could stand the test of any material or anybody coming in and checking out their capabilities and responsibilities.

01-00:55:05

Rigelhaupt:

And this work was after 1963? Did you commonly go to islands in the Pacific while you were still active duty in the military? Was that one of the things the base did?

01-00:55:23

Snipes:

I didn't do that. The only thing we did from the base was that every six months, we'd have the atomic testing. We were still assigned to the Oakland Army Base. After that six month period, we'd come back. Six months later we were looking up to go again. That went on for five years. It was a very interesting experience, too.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 snipes_Charles_2_06_19_2008.wav

02-00:00:00

Rigelhaupt:

We're on tape number two, with Charles L. Snipes. Just before we changed tapes, you were talking about your experiences with the atomic testing.

02-00:00:16

Snipes:

From the Oakland Army Base, there were nineteen ships that made this task force. We picked up our company at the Oakland Army Base. It was a joint task force with the Second Engineers {First?} Brigade out of Seattle and then the Marines down in San Diego. There were 19 ships involved and we'd go out to Anawetok, Johnson Island and Kwajalein every year. That's when they were doing the first development of the atomic devices. And we would repeat that every five years. The very first atmospheric testing they ever did in the Pacific, I'm happy to say that I was there. I'll never forget it. They got a little more sophisticated as time went on. Holmes and Narver was the company that was engineering that for the Department of Energy. Johnson Island was the control island for all of the testing.

Since that time, they got more sophisticated with the computer technology and all that kind of testing. So Johnson Island was closed I guess it was about a year ago now. They had a big bird sanctuary there and they turned it over. They made a bird sanctuary out of it. There's no personnel on there at all now. They do have a caretaker that goes out there from Honolulu, checking on the birds and making sure everything is all right. But at Johnson, the military came in with cargo three times a week. They could take all of their big planes, the C-5s—when that came in, you'd have to make sure that everything in and around the runway was buckled down or tied down because anything that was loose, you'd have to look for it after it was gone. But most of it was the C-141s and that came in regularly. They still have the airstrips. There's an emergency airstrip in there for a rescue process. That's how it is now.

I have a couple of brochures here that I saved from the Oakland Army Base and I'd like to give these to you. I don't know whether you can use them or not. Colonel {Tyndale}, he was the commanding officer that closed down the Oakland Army Base. So that might have some reference to you. That's just two of the brochures that were found in my collection there.

02-00:03:41

Rigelhaupt:

Thank you. You said you were there for the first atmospheric testing. What was that like? Could you describe it?

02-00:03:55

Snipes:

That was very exciting. When that warm air came swishing by my face, it was much more exciting. You didn't know what the situation was, but you knew that something had to be done. They were doing a lot of atmospheric testing at that time. Later on, they got a lot of sophistication now. They've got computer programs now that they can get the same results and they don't have to have the exposure of the people and the contamination of the land like they did in the early ages. That just the learning process.

02-00:04:50

Rigelhaupt:

So you saw the mushroom cloud?

02-00:04:54

Snipes:

The first one I ever saw and I'll never forget it.

02-00:05:05

Rigelhaupt:

If we could jump backwards a little bit, where were you born?

02-00:05:09

Snipes:

I was born in Georgia. A place called McDonald.

02-00:05:24

Rigelhaupt:

And did you grow up in McDonald, Georgia?

02-00:05:27

Snipes:

I grew up in Macon, Georgia. My mother was from McDonald and she moved to Macon. I grew up in Macon. Went to school in Macon High School?

02-00:05:47

Rigelhaupt:

And what was Macon like when you were growing up?

02-00:05:48

Snipes:

It was a nice Southern town and at that time it was totally segregated but the people were very harmonious and good race relationship. All the schools, though, were still segregated. You went to black schools. But they were quality and I'll never forget my fourth grade teacher. She's the one who I think gave me my start on life. If you got out of line with her, she would call the little punishment Dr. Black. It was a little piece of leather on a stick. If you got out line, you'd have to hold your hand out and she'd spank you in the hand there with old Dr. Black three or four times. You wouldn't get that one or two times. I got my share of it though. I think it's twice I got tied up with Dr. Black there. You won't forget it. But the education was good.

02-00:07:21

Rigelhaupt:

Early years in Macon, sounds like you were in elementary school there. What was a typical day like there for your parents?

02-00:08:00

Snipes:

My mother always took us to school. She'd walk us to school. I'll never forget the name of the elementary school was the Miriam {Britannia} School. The founder of that school was the principal of that school. She was a staunch educator and she set the pace there. If you did not measure up to those standards, she would have a little discussion with you and next thing you know, the parents were called in. Then you kind of straightened up. Those days, the parents and the teachers were more involved in the education of the children than they are today. That's a shame, though, because it takes the combination of the two to really raise the child and educate the child. But nowadays, parents, if they discipline that child, they're ready to sue. It's because of that attitude that teachers are having such a disciplinary problem in school. They spend more time trying to regulate and take care of the troublemakers and that denies the other kids the opportunity to get an education.

When I was in school, they didn't tolerate that. You went get to school to get an education and to learn. If you didn't want to learn, then you shouldn't be in school. That was the attitude that they took and they would discipline you for it and they would call up the parents they did. And my daddy would get home that night and that was a terrible place. That teacher called me and told me that you did this and went through that again with him. That straightened you up. But parents are not that strict today. All that stuff was good for me because it gave me good discipline and gave me good directions and it's good. Whenever I see a child that's graduated from high school and they don't know what they want to do, they haven't had the right discipline. Because we knew what we wanted to do and we trained our children. Like {Godora}, for example. She knew she wanted to be a nurse in elementary school. I had a godsister in the Navy and she came by the house one day with her uniform on on the way to work and that would impress her when she was a small child. She always talked about that. Then we found out that she wanted to be a nurse, so we then channeled those scientific programs in her direction so that she would get a good foundation.

One of the counselors that she had did not think that black students should be nurses. We heard about it and we went and had a talk with her. Not only she didn't think that they should be nurses, but she didn't think that they should progress in school as well. So we had to get rid of her and I went to the principal on that and she was assigned a new counselor. He was gung-ho helping her get through those classes, giving her assignments that were beneficial to her in a nursing career. That worked out just fine. She went from high school up to Chico. Chico at that time was the number one school for nurses in the whole state. You graduated from Chico, it was just like coming out of Harvard. So she graduated from Chico and she was a surgical nurse. She works for Kaiser now. If you take an interest in a child's education in their formative years, it will go far with them in their later years.

02-00:12:32

Rigelhaupt:

What did your parents do for a living?

02-00:12:37

Snipes:

My father was a barber. He had a barber shop and eight chairs. I operated one of the chairs after I got out of high school. We had a wine store, barber shop and a cafe. My mother operated the cafe. He was in the barber shop until I got old enough and then I ran the barber shop and he ran the wine shop. It was a family operation there all right there together.

That worked out very good. I was drafted into the service and didn't see that as what I wanted to do as my livelihood. My father was very disappointed when I decided I wanted to stay in the service because he was looking for me to come back and take over my job at the barbershop. But I had other things that I wanted to do, planning my future. That worked out good for me.

02-00:13:48

Rigelhaupt:

Now you were rather young—probably only about six years old or so—when the Depression really was ramping up, so to say. I'm just curious how it had an effect on your family and Macon as a whole, in what you remember about the Depression.

02-00:14:05

Snipes:

We have a big family. There was nine boys and three girls. We went through the Depression but we were never hungry and we never went barefooted and we never did go without clothing. Some of it was hand-me-downs but that's one thing that my mother and father made sure that we had. Back in those days, I think cigarettes were selling for a penny a piece. I didn't smoke, but you could get a whole package for twenty cents. You could ride the bus for a nickel. I was getting \$21 a month when I went into the service and that \$21 carried me for the whole month. I wanted to buy a house for my mother and so I started working. I used my barber experience and I got a job in PX. So I was cutting hair in the PX while I was in the service. And so all that extra money went to me and I saved it. Then we got a down payment on a house and then I bought the house for the family. My father didn't believe in owning a house. He always wanted to rent. I tried to talk him out of that but I couldn't. I got the house for my mother. I put it in her name because I knew his philosophy. That's how we grew up in the Depression. We experienced it but we didn't suffer from it.

02-00:16:02

Rigelhaupt:

Now you said you weren't sure you wanted to stay in the military once you were drafted.

02-00:16:10

Snipes:

No I didn't say that. My father didn't want me to go stay in the military, but I wanted to stay in the military. So I chose to say. He didn't like it but, at that time, I saw some benefits of it that outweighed my staying and working at the barbershop. My other brother was coming along so he took care of that. All

the boys came up through the barbershop. During those days, you could get a hair cut for fifteen cents and you could get a shave for a dime. Twenty five cents, you could get the whole thing done. That went a long ways. Heck, nowadays, you can't even do anything for twenty five cents [laughter].

02-00:17:15

Rigelhaupt:

So from the time you were drafted in '42 and basically from the time you came out to the Oakland Army Base in '45 until the time you retired from the military in '63, you were stationed at the Oakland Army Base?

02-00:17:29

Snipes:

I was stationed at the Oakland Army Base for a total of five years. The other times I went from where I was stationed in Japan for three years. I was there for five years. My wife, she came over. Our first daughter was born in Japan. She was there for three years. We came back from Japan and then I went to Germany. I came back and I wanted the Presidio, but I got Fort Ord. So I was there at Fort Ord for awhile then, from there, went to Germany. Then, when I left Germany—I was in Germany for four years—we came to Beale Air Force Base up in Marysville. Then I went to France. Well, no I went to Fort Ord and then the Berlin crisis occurred. I was the second logistical command. I was the budget officer there for the second law command. Then they levied the second law command for officers to join the 84th Engineer Battalion. So, I went to the 84th Engineer Battalion as the assistant battalion supply officer. Then we went from there to France, down near {La Rouchelle}. We were assigned to a park and we built our own camp. I was there for about two years. When I went to Fort Ord, I had three more years to go before retirement, but I was at Fort Ord for one year and about a week. The rest of the time I spent before coming back, we were supposed to come back to Fort Ord and then made that a permanent change. My family was still living in Fort Ord in the government housing so then I had to come back home. Then, my brother died. So when I was back then, I relocated my family from Fort Ord to Hayward. That was done in '62, then I retired in '63.

02-00:20:40

Rigelhaupt:

You were a lot of places. It sounds like a lot of the time you were in the service and stationed in the U.S., you were along the West Coast.

02-00:20:52

Snipes:

Yes. I was at Fort Ord, the Oakland Army Base, never did get the Presidio. Then I was up at Beale Air Force Base. Those were the three places on the West Coast. You know the Air Force now as "Air Force," but when I was in the service, it was part of the Army—the Army Air Corps. They separated from the Army somewhere around 1951, 52, somewhere in that range. Then the Army assigned troops to the Air Force to handle their engineering. We had five battalions up at Beale Air Force Base. They called them special troops assigned to Air Force. There, I had the base supply account. That serviced both the base and also battalion. That was part of my assignment there. That was very good because from there, when I came back from Germany, I went

to Fort Ord to get away for my retirement at three years left. So that's how I got tied up going to France in the meantime when the Berlin crisis occurred. I served out my time there and then I came back.

02-00:23:50

Rigelhaupt:

What do you remember about hearing the decision to close the Oakland Army Base? When it was put on the closure list.

02-00:23:11

Snipes:

It was a sad day when that occurred. The Department of Defense wanted to have a set of two commands on the West Coast and the East Coast for logistics and material and support. They wanted to have one command and the East Coast won out on that to my chagrin. It affected the West Oakland area materially because you had people that were employed there, had been working there for thirty years or so, maybe longer. Some of those transferred when they went over to Concord. I fought Dellums for this. Dellums was anti-military in all of his time in Washington. They wanted to put the battleship Missouri here in San Francisco. He was against that. But it ended up in Honolulu. They didn't need more, they got plenty of them. But that's where it ended up. So when they had the base closures, they took all the things that normally would have come to the Oakland Army Base and assigned it to Washington. So then, they shifted emphasis from the Oakland Army Base to Washington and then they closed the base. Had they had proper political support, that would have never happened. Because not only did they close all the military facilities in Oakland, but in San Francisco and the Bay Area as well. The only military installation left was up at Travis Air Force Base. The Coast Guard is in Alameda. The Coast Guard is not a Department of Defense unit, so if you're talking about Department of Defense, you can't count that. But that's the only quasi-military outfit, the Coast Guard. But the only military outfit is up at Travis Air Force Base. All the rest of them are moved out.

02-00:27:22

Rigelhaupt:

So you think some of the decisions to close basis in the area and the Oakland Army Base among them—politics played a role.

02-00:27:38

Snipes:

That's right. I blame Dellums for that, too.

02-00:27:50

Rigelhaupt:

Do you think that the Oakland Army Base was still vital for military operations at the time that it was put on the base closure list.

02-00:27:55

Snipes:

I think it was because they had better port facilities than they had up at Seattle and they are better able. The Oakland Army Base is a central hub in the San Francisco Bay Area. You couldn't want a better location for that kind of operation. Up in Seattle, you don't get the same kind of operation. You've got the airports here, you got all the trucks and traffic all comes into the hub here

in the Bay Area, and it was a good location for the Defense Department. But it was anti-politics and that's what defeated the Army base.

02-00:28:55

Rigelhaupt:

How would you like to see it redeveloped? What are some of the ideal things that could be done with the Oakland Army Base now that it is closed?

02-00:29:10

Snipes:

I thought at one time that it would be good for the community and good for the people to develop that Oakland Army Base into some kind of a combination of housing and business. I still think that they need to take advantage of the seaport resources because it's really ideal. All of the container ships. They're dredging the estuary so they can get bigger ships and the Oakland Army Base is more suited for that. The port facility in San Francisco, back in 1945 and '44, those were in demand. But they didn't keep them up. The Oakland Army Base passed them with their containerization. They're still playing catch-up over there simply because all of the pier facilities in San Francisco at that time were owned by the state and not by the city. I think they have gotten that changed now but it's too late. San Francisco controls that area now, but they took it in a dilapidated state so they're going to have to find some other uses for that. Like Pier 39. They have brought that through and there are some other improvements that they're going to be doing with the port facilities over there that would make it more compatible.

But the Army base. The Port of Oakland is number three in the whole country and the port facility that we have here is ideal for any kind of ship anyway. But they have a little stickaboo with that estuary out there. They have to keep draining it because it gets too much saltation out there. They need ships coming in here now with a thirty eight to forty foot draft and, some places, they don't have that.

02-00:31:54

Rigelhaupt:

As I look over at questions I had, we covered a lot of them. The way I like end an interview is to ask one, is there anything I should have asked and I didn't and two, if there's anything you'd like to add about the Oakland Army Base?

02-00:32:15

Snipes:

I think that the Oakland Army Base should be developed into an enterprise that would be beneficial to both the seagoing adventures and also the residential population that is living here. It could be a very vital part and I'd obviously like to see that because they have the facilities. The port of Oakland has done a marvelous job in converting the Navy Supply Center and improving their port facilities and their access to better harbors. The same thing can be done for the Oakland Army Base. They have a warehouse structure over there that could be adapted to ocean and ship movement and they could also be adopted to civilian application. I don't think that getting a casino over there in Oakland, I don't think that's the approach that should be. Don't sell it to the Indians. And the port's development of that, I think they're

looking at it in the right perspective, is to develop that with the maritime thought in mind of improving that. Because if they don't improve it, some of the other ports are going to surpass them. They have a good chance to do that now. They can do wonders. The Port of Oakland has done a lot with the Navy Supply Center and they could do a lot for the Oakland Army Base. I just hope they do it.

02-00:34:17

Rigelhaupt: Okay, I think that's a nice note to end on. Thank you.

[End of Interview]