

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Michael Thomas:
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Ann Lage
in 2009

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Discursive Table of Contents: Michael Thomas

Interview 1: February 2, 2009-07-10

Audio File 1

1

Birth in Würzburg, Germany, in 1960, father's work as transportation officer—yearly moves until fourth grade, residence in Cincinnati during father's Vietnam War service—childhood as a military dependent, Army brat culture and camaraderie—1978 high school graduation and immediate family move to Bay Area, housing at Fort Mason, father's post at Oakland Army Base—studying journalism at San Jose State—diversity and flexibility of military culture, acceptance of differences and change—decreasing military presence in Bay Area—father's work at OAB as director of inland traffic—summer job at AAFES warehouse—memories of the gas crisis—parents' move back to Washington, D.C., summer internship at Andrews Air Force Base PR office—Army race relations out-pace the civilian world—memories of race relations in the south in the 1960s—military necessity of accepting diversity—mother's roots in Beaufort, NC—father's upbringing in Cincinnati, Ohio State athletic scholarship. ROTC—following father's footsteps: ROTC at San Jose State, officer transportation school at Fort Eustis—ten years active duty and five-six in the reserves, decision to leave active duty while stationed at OAB—challenges of recruiting work during Desert Storm—Bay Area anti-military culture, recruiters banned from high school and college campuses—arrival at OAB in 1991, work with Military Traffic Management Command, organizing the post-Desert Storm parade—working with the City of Oakland, chamber of commerce—Mayor Elihu Harris's refusal to ride in the parade—politics of recruiting: quotas, testing new recruits, ASVAB test.

Audio File 2

27

Closing thoughts on challenges of recruiting—work in reserve affairs at OAB after Desert Storm—comparing accommodations at the Presidio and Fort Mason—working relations between military and civilians—move from headquarters to garrison, intricacies of military hierarchy—administration of military police, people skills—1992 policing the Crosswinds Club and civilian clientele—lasting connections at OAB from teen years as a dependent—reserve duty in Oakland, Concord and Fort Eustis—almost called back to active duty after 9/11—OAB closure, PR, ceremony planning and logistics—OAB community's sadness over base closure—marine superintendent work at APL after 1993 discharge, supervising stevedores—military lessons in effective leadership—positive aspects of military culture: volunteerism, community, diversity—thoughts on gays in the military, “don't ask, don't tell” policy—challenges of increasing numbers of women in the military—military flexibility: “the military has a way of absorbing whatever it is and making it work”.

Interview #1: February 2, 2009

Begin Audio File 1 thomas_michael_1_02-06-09.wav

01-00:00:07

Lage: We're interviewing Michael Thomas. May I call you Mike?

01-00:00:11

Thomas: Yes, please do.

01-00:00:12

Lage: Okay, and this is for the Oakland Army Base project. I'm Ann Lage with the Regional Oral History Office at UC Berkeley. Okay, Mike, we always start with some personal, just to kind of set you in your place, time. When were you born and where and something about your parents?

01-00:00:29

Thomas: I was born on July 12, 1960 in Würzburg, Germany. My father was in the military. Both my brother and I were born in Germany, same hospital, same doctor.

01-00:00:42

Lage: Was your brother older or younger?

01-00:00:43

Thomas: My brother was sixteen months older than I am, so—

01-00:00:51

Lage: And your dad?

01-00:00:52

Thomas: My dad was an officer. My dad was a transportation officer.

01-00:00:56

Lage: Okay, so he was in the Transportation Quarter.

01-00:00:58

Thomas: Transportation Quarter. When I was born he was stationed in Schweinfurt, Germany, and the regional hospital there was Würzburg. I stayed in Germany for about nine months, and then believe it or not we came back on one of the old victory ships.

01-00:01:18

Lage: One of the old {inaudible}.

01-00:01:19

Thomas: Right, coming back, and—

01-00:01:21

Lage: You don't remember that!

01-00:01:23

Thomas: Oh no, I was nine months old!

01-00:01:26

Lage: So where did you live, as your father must have been moved {inaudible}.

01-00:01:29

Thomas: Oh yeah, we moved up until I was in about the fourth grade we moved basically at least once a year. We came back from Germany; I believe we went to Fort Eustis, Virginia, which is the home of the Transportation Quarter. From there we went to Battle Creek, Michigan. We spent like three years in Battle Creek. From there we went—

01-00:01:54

Lage: And what was in Battle Creek?

01-00:01:55

Thomas: I believe it was a supply depot, and I believe he had some work that he did with the reserves in the area. From there we went to New Cumberland Army Depot, or not New Cumberland—we went to Virginia. I'm trying to remember the name of the base there. It's right on Virginia Beach actually. Fort Story! Fort Story, Virginia, and literally it's on Virginia Beach, and my dad, I believe he was a battalion commander there.

01-00:02:39

Lage: He must have been moving up a lot.

01-00:02:40

Thomas: Right, I'm not sure whether he was a lieutenant colonel by then. I believe he was a major at that point, so maybe he was the executive officer of the battalion there, and it was an amphibious unit. In fact, during Armed Forces Day they used to give the dependents rides in the amphibious vehicles, and they'd just barely go out into the ocean there at Virginia Beach, give a little ride and come back on. But we stayed there for about a year, and then from there my dad went to Vietnam. This was 1966 he went to Vietnam. We moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, which is where he was from, so my first grade I was in Cincinnati.

01-00:03:29

Lage: So did you move with his parents?

01-00:03:31

Thomas: My brother, my mom, and I stayed in an apartment, but basically my dad's entire family was in Cincinnati so we had family everywhere. And like I said, I went to the first grade in Cincinnati. He came back from Vietnam. We moved to Pennsylvania. Actually, we stayed in three different places in Pennsylvania, or two different places in Pennsylvania. We started school in Cincinnati, started second grade in Cincinnati, we moved to Middletown, Pennsylvania, spent probably a couple months in Middletown, and then we moved to New Cumberland Army Depot, so I actually—my second grade we went to three different elementary schools.

01-00:04:25

Lage: This must be really hard growing up!

01-00:04:26

Thomas: Well, you know, when you're that young you really don't know it. I mean, honestly, it's just part of growing up. You don't really think anything of it. The kids that you're around, everyone's going through the same thing, so really you think it's normal. And you look back on it, and sure you would like to have an experience where you're growing up around the same kids and you're infants together and next thing you know you're graduating from high school and you've been around all the same kids, but there's also an excitement about—one of the things that we did as kids was we never said goodbye, it was "See you next time," because you would run into the same people somewhere down the line.

01-00:05:12

Lage: Because were a lot of the people you were going to school with other Army—

01-00:05:15

Thomas: All Army brats, all Army brats.

01-00:05:16

Lage: Oh, I see, so it was Army schools for the most part.

01-00:05:20

Thomas: Right.

01-00:05:21

Lage: I see. Oh, no wonder you probably run into them again.

01-00:05:24

Thomas: And it's funny because after—that was second grade. Third grade we went to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas—my dad was in one of the career officer courses there—and spent a year there, and I was in the third grade with some kids that when I went to high school ran into them again! We ended up at the same, and it was kind of funny because our fathers were in completely different what they call corps of the Army; my dad was transportation corps, I think this particular person her father was ordinance, and like I said, oddly enough you just somehow end up in the same place. And you'll look at them, and it's like, "You know, you look familiar," and then you start going back, "Well, where have you been stationed?" And then you start going back and finally you end up figuring it out, and yeah, it's pretty—

01-00:06:19

Lage: And your identity must be pretty strong with the Army.

01-00:06:24

Thomas: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, but I think the kids, even up through high school, you kind of get this fellowship between all of you because, again, you have an understanding of what the other person's been through. A lot of us—

my dad, when I was thirteen and my brother was fourteen, my dad was in Korea for a year, and I still think back to my mother, here she is by herself with a thirteen and a fourteen year old, and my mother is all of four foot eleven inches, and here you got two teenage kids that are at a point in time in their lives where they're not the easiest people to deal with, and somehow she made it through. But again, we weren't living on a military base at the time but we were in the Washington, D.C. area and there's a lot of military people around, so again, you just help each other out. My dad wasn't there, but we had plenty of male authority around, so when she needed help there was someone there! [laughter]

01-00:07:36

Lage: Were you raised, as I would imagine an Army child raised, kind of strictly? Respect and order and things like that?

01-00:07:44

Thomas: Oh, absolutely. Well, yeah, there was a lot of respect. You didn't call someone else's father by their first name, it was Colonel this or Major that, and you didn't call anyone's mother by their first name, it was Mrs. So-and-so, "Yes, sir," "No, ma'am." I'm not sure that it's that way now, times have changed so much, but back in those days it was very, very respectful and it didn't seem out of place for someone to say "Yes, sir," "No, sir." I can still remember as a little kid going to church, and we held the doors for the ladies, even though I was ten years old. We held the door. That was just the men trying to teach the young boys how to be men and how to be respectful. It's something that it's kind of funny today. I still do it, it's just out of habit—well, it's out of a habit, not of respect, but it's interesting to see some of the reactions sometimes. You'll hold the door for—I go to the gym, I'll hold a door for a lady walking in and she'll look at me, "Thank you!" like it's something that they don't normally get, and—

01-00:08:55

Lage: And do you have children yourself?

01-00:08:57

Thomas: Yes, I have two kids, two kids.

01-00:08:59

Lage: Are you passing this on?

01-00:09:02

Thomas: You know, both of my kids are grown and out on their own, so I did my best! [laughter] You know, I hear from other people that they're always respectful of them, and they act well.

01-00:09:18

Lage: Okay, now I don't think we've got you quite to Oakland yet.

01-00:09:22

Thomas:

Okay, well, let's see. Third grade I was in Fort Leavenworth, and then fourth grade we moved to the Washington, D.C. area. I stayed there from the fourth through the eighth grade, and then went from the Washington, D.C. area to Aberdeen Proving Grounds in upstate Maryland and spent my entire high school years there, and believe it or not the day after graduation we hopped in our cars—my brother and I were in a 1969 Volkswagen Bug and my parents were in an Oldsmobile—and we drove from Aberdeen, Maryland to San Francisco, and my dad had gotten stationed at Oakland Army Base. My brother was going to West Point, and I was going to San Jose State.

01-00:10:12

Lage:

I see. So you weren't in high school while you were on the base. Somehow I had the impression—

01-00:10:17

Thomas:

No, when I was as a dependent, we actually lived—my father was stationed at Oakland Army Base, but the officers—my father was a full bird colonel at the time—we actually stayed over at Fort Mason in San Francisco.

01-00:10:35

Lage:

Yeah, that's what I thought most of the officers did.

01-00:10:36

Thomas:

Just a block away from Ghirardelli Square.

01-00:10:38

Lage:

Not a bad place to live!

01-00:10:40

Thomas:

Oh, it's a horrible place! [laughter] Yeah, it was really interesting, and we had never been to California. Well, I think I came out to California one time when I was twelve years old for like a week or two-week vacation. Other than that, I'd never been to California. Here I am, an eighteen-year-old kid, it was a new experience. Got a chance to see sights that people just would die to see. I mean, people really love coming to California, especially to the San Francisco Bay Area, and here I had a chance—again, I could walk, it took me five minutes to get to Ghirardelli Square and the Wharf. So I learned how to use the transit system, use the bus system. Back in those days it took you twenty-five cents to go one way and twenty-five cents to get back, so if I had fifty cents in my pocket I could basically go anywhere in San Francisco. It was really, really nice.

01-00:11:33

Lage:

Great. And how did you happen on San Jose State, and journalism? You studied journalism.

01-00:11:37

Thomas:

Well, yeah, I studied journalism. Actually, I was a journalist for our school newspaper in high school. That's kind of where I got a little bit of the bug, but

when I started college I wanted to go to San Francisco State and just live at home, and as fathers can do sometimes my dad decided that I needed to move out of the house! [laughter]

01-00:12:07

Lage: He thought it'd be good for you!

01-00:12:08

Thomas: Well, yeah, I think he thought it would probably be good for all of us! And so I said, "Well, I'll just move into the dorms at San Francisco State," and he said, "Look, if we're living in San Francisco, I don't see any reason why you should be living in the dorms in San Francisco, so cancel San Francisco State." So I had applied to some other state schools, and San Jose State happened to be one of the ones that I got accepted. It was sixty miles away, an hour away; I was close enough to home where I could hop on a train or hop on a bus somehow and get back home, and it was far enough away where they had to make an effort to get there, so it kind of seemed like the right place to go, and it had the majors that I wanted, I was interested in. I actually started out as a biology major, spent about a year and a half doing that and decided that that really wasn't what I wanted to do, and then went into journalism and ended up getting my degree in journalism.

01-00:13:10

Lage: Now, did you ever think about trying to go the West Point route or something like that?

01-00:13:15

Thomas: No, I knew West Point was not for me. Again, having been an Army brat, you really know what the service schools are like, and at that point in time in my life that was not a good place for me!

01-00:13:28

Lage: You're making little indications of that point in time! Coming to California, it was the late seventies.

01-00:13:35

Thomas: 1978.

01-00:13:35

Lage: You came in '78. Well, I don't think of that as the height of the countercultural revolution, but it was still around. How did you relate to that?

01-00:13:45

Thomas: Well, I guess my personality is the type—I'm a very accepting person. You know, I don't—and again, it gets back to being a military brat. I mean, you're exposed to so many different cultures, so many different types of people that you become very accepting of things that are different. Just because someone's different from me doesn't mean that they're bad or they're wrong, that's just the way they are, and you have to accept it. I mean, I'm sure that there's people who will look at me, just look at me and not like me because

that's the way they are, and I feel sorry for people who do that. Again, the way I was raised with my parents it was you have to be accepting of different people, their cultures, what they think, and just because that's the way you think you don't have all the answers, so coming to San Francisco and the Bay Area, I think it was a very good fit for me. Having grown up mostly on the East Coast it's kind of a different society. It has a lot of cultures, I would say mostly European-based cultures, and Baltimore, big Polish, German, a lot of African-American cultures. Other than that, back in those days those were the predominant cultures. Then coming out here, a lot of Asian, and there were different cultures—I mean, I'd never really thought about Samoans, and there's a huge Samoan population out here, and, of course, like a lot of people you look at the Samoans, especially the men, and it's like oh my God these guys are huge! And going to San Jose State, eventually I ended up playing soccer there, and so I was involved in the athletic department, and it just so happened that San Jose State football had a lot of Samoans playing for it, and I always used to joke that I've never met a Samoan male under 250 pounds! I mean, they are! They're the nicest guys in the world, but they're huge! They are big men!

01-00:16:07

Lage:

That's good for football!

01-00:16:08

Thomas:

Oh, absolutely. But again, I was able to be exposed to a lot of cultures that I probably wouldn't have been exposed to if I'd have stayed on the East Coast.

01-00:16:19

Lage:

San Francisco has the reputation for having kind of an anti-military outlook, and did you feel any of that in your travels?

01-00:16:27

Thomas:

No, not really. Well, not at that time. You know, it's kind of funny because yes, it does have that type of feel to it, a lot of people have that impression of it, but if you really look at the San Francisco Bay Area to include Oakland, there was a very big military presence in that area, and the economy at that time for this area was really based on the military. You had Oakland Army Base, you had Alameda Naval Air Station, you had the Presidio. Over on the Sausalito side you had Fort Baker. Over here, again, you had Oak Knoll Naval Hospital, and that's within ten or fifteen miles of each other, and then you go down to the South Bay. You had the naval air station down there that was Moffett Field. So the military presence was huge here, and—

01-00:17:28

Lage:

Mostly closed down now!

01-00:17:31

Thomas:

The only place that's open, I believe, in the San Francisco Bay area that's even remotely military is Coast Guard Island, and the next base is Travis Air Force Base, and after that there's nothing, which is a shame because I know

that a lot of the military retired in this area thinking that there's always going to be services here, there's always going to be a post exchange, there's always going to be a commissary. No one ever thought that Letterman Army Hospital would ever go away, so you do your twenty years, you've got medical and post exchange commissary privileges for the rest of your life, and they just figured they would always be there, and then within a few years everything was gone.

01-00:18:20

Lage: Yeah, it's amazing. Do you know much about your dad's work at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:18:26

Thomas: He was the director of inland traffic, so he was all the tracking, rail—

01-00:18:32

Lage: The routes to the water, to and from?

01-00:18:35

Thomas: Basically, yes, to and from the water, and just basically all the cargo, the documentation, the planning of movement of cargo, all of that went through his office. So it was pretty involved.

01-00:18:50

Lage: Did you ever get out with him on the base at all and see—

01-00:18:54

Thomas: Not really in a work sense. Believe it or not, in the summers there were a few of us dependents that would work at the warehouses for the Air Force and Army Exchange Service, AAFES, and we were warehousemen building—

01-00:19:12

Lage: Good summer jobs!

01-00:19:14

Thomas: Good summer job. You know, you had to get up early, work 'til mid-afternoon, came home and ate dinner, and you were so exhausted, went to sleep, got up the next morning and went back to work. Kept us out of trouble, put a little money in our pocket for the beginning of the next school year. And there were I think about five of us, and we would carpool over, come back, so that made it nice.

01-00:19:45

Lage: And these were all fellows that lived at Fort Mason.

01-00:19:48

Thomas: All of our dads were colonels. So our dads were in one carpool, and all the kids were in another carpool. Yeah, it was pretty fun.

01-00:19:58

Lage:

So is there anything to tell me about that experience or what you saw, what the base seemed like at the time? No wars were going on.

01-00:20:05

Thomas:

No, there were no wars going on. Actually, the biggest thing back in those days was the very first gas problem.

01-00:20:15

Lage:

Oh, the shortage of gas?

01-00:20:16

Thomas:

Absolutely, and it's funny because where Fort Mason is in San Francisco, on the corner of Bay and Van Ness Street used to be a huge gas station, and I can still remember you could—depending on the last number of your license plate, they had odd days and even days, and on Bay Street it would go almost to—I'm trying to remember the name of the park. There's a park that's probably about a good quarter of a mile, maybe a little bit more, and the cars were lined up all the way to there to try and get to that gas station, and of course people would try and get in there on the days that they're not supposed to be in there, and there'd be all these arguments, and you could hear them screaming and hollering at each other and honking horns, and—

01-00:21:10

Lage:

Now, did the Army people have a separate supply area, or did they have to go to the gas station, too?

01-00:21:15

Thomas:

Well, we had on Presidio, which was maybe a mile away from Fort Mason, military had their own fueling facility, but I think even then the military still honored the odd day/even day just like everyone else, and on Oakland Army Base itself there was a very small gas station there, but again, it was odd day/even day. So you had to plan on what you were doing and really—because if you got caught out there, I mean, couldn't get gas if your license plate was on the wrong day.

01-00:21:55

Lage:

Yeah, and you had to get around from Fort Mason.

01-00:21:58

Thomas:

Well, if you were staying in San Francisco, I mean, the transit system is so good over there that if you really plan it out you don't need a vehicle. Again, I was eighteen years old, and back in those days one of the good things of being in that area, there were a lot of live music clubs, and even as an eighteen year old you could go into the club. They wouldn't serve you alcohol, but you could go in and sit and listen to the bands. So what I would do is sometimes I'd walk down to the wharf and just walk around until I heard live music. And there were no cover charges. It was just one of the best environments you could ever imagine! No cover charges, you just walked in, listened to the music, had good fellowship with the people there, and if it was too far to walk

you could hop on a bus. I used to take the forty-seven bus, go down to Market Street, and start walking around until I heard music, just go walking in, so it was really interesting.

01-00:23:01

Lage: You were happy here!

01-00:23:03

Thomas: I loved it!

01-00:23:03

Lage: Well, for your dad, was it considered a desirable assignment to get the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:23:08

Thomas: Oh, absolutely.

01-00:23:09

Lage: Because you were in the San Francisco Bay Area, or just because of the base itself?

01-00:23:13

Thomas: I think it was a desirable assignment based on the job itself. It was a pretty prestigious job in the Military Traffic Management Command. They—

01-00:23:25

Lage: So was he in the headquarters? As I talk to people—

01-00:23:27

Thomas: Building One, Building One.

01-00:23:29

Lage: And that's the MTMC Headquarters Building, and then there was also the garrison there, I guess, but your dad wasn't part of that.

01-00:23:37

Thomas: No, he wasn't part of the garrison there.

01-00:23:39

Lage: Okay, so that was a good assignment for the MTMC.

01-00:23:41

Thomas: Absolutely, absolutely. In fact, when he left there he went back to the MTMC Headquarters, which was back in the Washington, D.C. area, and basically took over—I think he was in inland traffic there but at a higher level, so yeah, it was a good stepping-stone for him.

01-00:24:01

Lage: Yeah. And then when he went back you lost your place at Fort Mason.

01-00:24:04

Thomas:

Yes, I did. I was still going to college, so I just stayed in the dorms until I graduated. That summer I came home, I went back to the Washington, D.C. area. My parents still live in the same house in Virginia, and went home, spent my summer there. Actually, I did my internship at Andrews Air Force Base in the Public Affairs Office there at Andrews Air Force Base, and that was when President Reagan had just been elected, so one of the jobs we had to do was to get the press ready for the presidential arrivals and departures and that type of stuff, so that was really interesting.

01-00:24:43

Lage:

That must've been interesting.

01-00:24:44

Thomas:

Oh, it was very interesting, very interesting to see what really happens. I mean, there's what you see on the TV, and then you get a chance to see what's really going on, because sometimes you'll see the president out there waving and smiling like he's got a big crowd getting ready to get onto the Marine chopper. There's no one there!

01-00:25:08

Lage:

He's just waving to the camera?

01-00:25:09

Thomas:

He's just waving! It's so funny.

01-00:25:11

Lage:

Oh, that's amazing!

01-00:25:12

Thomas:

Oh, yeah, they're just waving. You got an entire press crew, camera crew out there, and they're filming the entire thing. He's waving to the camera crew! But that's politics. You know, part of it is the whole theater of it. But you would've never—if you've never been there and actually seen it, you would never know. You would think that he's got a huge crowd and there were a lot of well-wishers. There's nobody there. Not all the time, but on a lot of the occasions there's nobody there.

01-00:25:40

Lage:

Right. Gosh! How did you experience race relations in the Army, being an Army kid?

01-00:25:48

Thomas:

You know, the time that I was growing up race relations in the Army was light years ahead of what a lot of the societies that you were living in were at, if that makes sense.

01-00:26:06

Lage:

It does, but tell me more!

01-00:26:08

Thomas:

Because, again, in the Army you are exposed to so many cultures, you learn to accept those cultures, and so if you're living in even Virginia Beach—and again, you have a huge military population down there—my brother and a good family friend of ours, there was basically almost like a private elementary school, and they basically broke the color barrier, and what it came down to was the Post there came back and said, “If you don't let these two kids go to your school, we're going to pull every military school out of your school. We're going to make your school off-limits.” So you would think that the society around such a huge military population would just be more accepting of the cultures that are on the base.

01-00:27:07

Lage:

Right. They depend on them, on the base.

01-00:27:09

Thomas:

They depend on it, absolutely, but sometimes it's just not that way.

01-00:27:13

Lage:

Yeah. What year would that have been? Do you know?

01-00:27:15

Thomas:

That was like 1965.

01-00:27:18

Lage:

Early on when they really hadn't affected desegregation in the South.

01-00:27:22

Thomas:

Absolutely. I mean, I can still remember traveling, and I used to tell my kids, I can still remember the colored bathrooms, the colored water fountains. I can remember not being able to eat, traveling on a bus and not being able to eat at the counter.

01-00:27:44

Lage:

That must've been really hard on your dad! Here he is, moving up in the military, and—

01-00:27:49

Thomas:

A lot of the minorities that were in the military at the time, it was extremely difficult. I mean, even going back to when you think about World War II where a lot of the black service members went to Europe and they could go anywhere they wanted to. They could do anything they wanted to. And as soon as they hit their own country after serving their country, potentially getting wounded—a lot of them came back with Purple Hearts and things like that—and here they are, they would come back to their own country and couldn't sit anywhere on the bus and couldn't eat at a lunch counter, and it was very difficult, as you can understand, was very difficult for them to take. And in my father's case, here he is, like you said, he's moving up in the military, and a lot of times he would go from one base to another and get set up prior to us getting there, and my mom, my brother, and I would get on a

Trailways or a Greyhound bus and he would meet us there, but on our way from Point A to Point B, we encountered a lot of things, like I said, colored bathrooms, and—

01-00:29:00

Lage: Any back of the bus kind of things, do you remember?

01-00:29:03

Thomas: You know, I really didn't remember a lot of that. I didn't notice that. I'm not saying that we didn't go back there, but I think at that age even if we did I wouldn't have known the reason. But yeah, it was just kind of ironic. You had a lot of people who were serving their countries and they're not really getting treated fairly.

01-00:29:26

Lage: But within the military itself, was there a lot of camaraderie between racial groups?

01-00:29:35

Thomas: It was changing. It was one of those things where was everyone in the military accepting? Absolutely not. Was it more prevalent as far as being accepting than what you would consider normal society? Absolutely. Absolutely. It's the old saying that people can go into a foxhole as enemies and they will come out as friends! So you get into close quarters—because a lot of prejudice is just ignorance! It's what someone has been told about “This person is going to be like this just because of what they are”, and they've been told this, it's been drilled into their head, and then all the sudden they meet something that doesn't fit their mold, and that's when it's incumbent upon the person to either want to know more, to really try and find out more about it and see what the person's really all about, and see if this person can really try, will break that preconceived idea of what a person is just based on what they are. And a lot of people—again, being in the military, I think it's more accepting for you to take that step. It's encouraged for you to take that step.

01-00:31:00

Lage: Right, that's what it sounds like.

01-00:31:02

Thomas: And a lot of people, like I said, they'll go into a situation not knowing about certain individuals and then come out of it with a completely different idea, and I think that people who served in the military after they got out of the military and they went back home, that's where a lot of that change came from, where they would hear people saying things about people of different ethnicities, and saying things, and they would say, “Well, you know what? That's not necessarily true.”

01-00:31:32

Lage: They'd been on the battlefield with them.

01-00:31:33

Thomas:

They'd been on the battlefield. They'd been in close quarters with them. They'd been able to sit down right across the table and talk to them, and know that there are intelligent, very well-read people of all ethnicities, and they've seen it firsthand. So just to see a person who's black, that doesn't mean that that person is not well read. That does not mean that that person doesn't have a college degree. One of the things that actually I'm very proud of in my family is that we have a lot of college graduates, especially on my mother's side. The way we were brought up was it wasn't a question of whether you were going to college or not, it was where are you going, and everything that you did leading up to that was based on you're in college prep. The option to take non-college prep courses in high school was not an option.

01-00:32:40

Lage:

Yeah, was the expectation.

01-00:32:42

Thomas:

Absolutely, and I cannot think of any of the kids that I grew up with, as far as cousins, I can't think of anybody who is not a college graduate. Everybody has a degree.

01-00:32:53

Lage:

And your parents, where did they grow up?

01-00:32:55

Thomas:

My mother grew up in Beaufort, North Carolina.

01-00:32:58

Lage:

Ah, from the South then.

01-00:33:00

Thomas:

From the South. It's a small community, fishing town, beautiful place to live. I mean, the first time I went down I think I was about sixteen or seventeen years old, and I had never seen anything like that in my life. I mean, to say it was quaint would be an understatement. Quick story: One of my cousins needed to get gas put in her car, and there were two young men walking down the street, and she just said, "Excuse me? Excuse me? Can you come here for a minute?" And she says, "I want you to take my car down to so-and-so's gas station, fill it up, tell them to put it on my tab, and then come back," and she gave them the key. I'm standing there and I'm looking at her, and I said, "Do you know who that was?" "No, not really!" I'm looking at her, "You've got to be kidding me!" And this kid took the car, went down, filled it up, and brought it back. And I said, "That would never happen where I live! You would never see that car again!" But that's the way that society was down there.

A lot of the fishermen, when they would finish getting their quotas for the supermarkets and things like that, they would literally be coming back from the docks with arms full of fish, and they would go to the elderly knocking on

their door, and they would just hold the fish out for them, “What do you want?” They didn’t pay for it, nothing, it’s just that was the way they took care of their people, and again, especially the elderly. They would pick their fish, and then at some point in time during the day maybe one of the neighborhood young ladies would come by and help them prepare their food and make sure they were okay.

01-00:34:54

Lage: Sounds like a totally different world.

01-00:34:56

Thomas: Oh, and I would not be surprised if it’s not almost the exact same way, even to this day.

01-00:35:05

Lage: And was your dad from the south, also?

01-00:35:06

Thomas: No, he was from Cincinnati, Ohio, grew up in the city. He grew up in the projects, kind of a rough upbringing, and—

01-00:35:20

Lage: Did he go to college?

01-00:35:21

Thomas: He went to Ohio State. Went to Ohio State, went there, believe it or not, on a football and track scholarship.

01-00:35:29

Lage: I was just going to say, it’s such a big football school!

01-00:35:31

Thomas: Yeah, but he was so small. My dad’s about 5’7”. I think he said he weighed about 119, 120 pounds, very small, and that was the first year that the famed coach Woody Hayes was there, and he said that Woody Hayes took one look at him and said, “Son, I think you should run track. You’re going to get killed out here.” [laughter] So he ended up not playing football, but he ran track for a couple of years while he was there, and he went into the ROTC program while he was there and when he graduated became a second lieutenant, and the rest is history. But he met my mother down at—he was stationed at Fort Eustis, Virginia. My mom was staying with her cousin in Norfolk, Virginia, and my cousin’s husband was a captain at Fort Eustis, and I think my mom may have been doing something with teaching at the time. My mother’s degree is in education. So my cousin told her husband, “I want you to find a young officer who doesn’t smoke, doesn’t drink, and goes to church on Sundays.” Came back with my dad! [laughter]

01-00:36:54

Lage: Did he meet all those requirements?

01-00:36:55
Thomas: He met all those requirements, and again, the rest is history. They ended up getting married.

01-00:37:01
Lage: Did your mother mind all the moving around?

01-00:37:05
Thomas: I don't think so. I think, you know, you just had to accept it. If you were going to make a career of it, you knew what you were getting into, and you just kind of accepted it as a way of life.

01-00:37:19
Lage: Now you, let's just think about you—you enlisted at some point.

01-00:37:24
Thomas: Actually, I went in as an officer. I also went to ROTC.

01-00:37:28
Lage: Oh, okay, at San Jose?

01-00:37:30
Thomas: At San Jose State. I did four years of ROTC, and when I graduated I went in active duty as a second lieutenant.

01-00:37:38
Lage: Okay. Does that make you a reserve officer then?

01-00:37:41
Thomas: No, I was regular Army. I was regular Army.

01-00:37:43
Lage: Okay. Were you in a particular division?

01-00:37:46
Thomas: Actually, I left San Jose State, went to my officer basic course at Fort Eustis, Virginia, was there for about I think six months. Then I—

01-00:37:58
Lage: Was it transportation?

01-00:37:59
Thomas: Transportation school.

01-00:38:00
Lage: Okay, you got to choose.

01-00:38:02
Thomas: No, actually, what you do is you tell your ROTC department the choices that you desire and then the Army comes back and tells you what you're going to be. And I didn't think that they would give me the Transportation Corps so I put that down first, just saying, "Well, they'll never give me my first choice."

I put in transportation first, and sure enough, they gave me Transportation Corps.

01-00:38:29

Lage: Is that what you really wanted?

01-00:38:31

Thomas: I didn't mind it. It was one of the things that if I had gotten it I was fine with it.

01-00:38:35

Lage: Yeah, you knew the biz!

01-00:38:38

Thomas: Right, right. But what was ironic was when I was commissioned as a second lieutenant, I was a second lieutenant, my brother was a first lieutenant, and my dad was a colonel, so we had three officers in the—

01-00:38:56

Lage: Your dad must've been proud!

01-00:38:58

Thomas: He actually came out for my commissioning ceremony at San Jose State—and then, what's kind of funny is you go through your commissioning ceremony at school—it's just a ceremony, it's really nothing binding at that point—and then later on you actually go through and say your oath. So I was going back to Fort Eustis, Virginia for my basic course. I actually took my oath at the Military Traffic Management Command Headquarters in Washington, D.C. and my dad gave me my oath, so yeah, that was really neat.

01-00:39:33

Lage: So how long, you were in for how long?

01-00:39:36

Thomas: I was actually in for ten years of active duty, and then I did a few tours in the reserves, so I think overall it was about fifteen or sixteen years.

01-00:39:47

Lage: Now, how does that work? I've heard people tell me they were reserve officer—they were actively in the Army for years and years, but they were a reserve officer.

01-00:39:56

Thomas: Right, then I decided to get off of active duty.

01-00:40:01

Lage: You didn't want to continue, become a twenty-year—

01-00:40:04

Thomas: Right, right. It's just you have to take a look at the effect that being in the military is having on your family. I knew at that point the Army was drawing

down the numbers. They were cutting out a lot of people, so at that point in time I was like, you know, if I'm going to get out this is probably the best time to do it. They were giving bonuses to get out.

01-00:40:28

Lage: What rank did you have at that point?

01-00:40:30

Thomas: I was a captain, and—

01-00:40:32

Lage: And you were married?

01-00:40:33

Thomas: Married, had two kids at the time. So I just decided if I'm going to do it, I might as well do it now. So I actually got off of active duty here at Oakland Army Base.

01-00:40:46

Lage: You mentioned that on the phone. What does that mean, getting out of active duty at Oakland Army Base?

01-00:40:51

Thomas: I resigned my commission.

01-00:40:53

Lage: But why Oakland Army Base?

01-00:40:56

Thomas: I just happened to be stationed there. What happened was after Fort Ord I went back to my advanced course at Fort Eustis. I went to Germany for three years, then I came back and I was in the recruiting brigade here in the San Francisco Bay area. Ended up being the last Oakland recruiting company commander before they closed down that area.

01-00:41:24

Lage: What year would that have been?

01-00:41:25

Thomas: That was in 1991.

01-00:41:27

Lage: This is Desert Storm time.

01-00:41:29

Thomas: When Desert Storm happened, I was in recruiting in the San Francisco, I was in Oakland. My area was from Hayward all the way to Richmond.

01-00:41:42

Lage: And what was it like to recruit during wartime, in a sense, in this area that does have—

01-00:41:49

Thomas:

It's very difficult, very, very difficult! A lot of challenges. You know, this area is—again, we talked about it earlier—it's not the most accepting area of the military to begin with, and the first Gulf War didn't last very long but it was still in this area a very unpopular war. There was a lot of talk of the government and the military targeting African-American communities as far as trying to get recruits, so they basically were trying to say that we were bringing the minorities in to go over there and get them killed.

01-00:42:34

Lage:

Right. Did you sense that, that they were targeting—? I mean, you were out there doing the recruiting!

01-00:42:40

Thomas:

No, absolutely! I didn't sense that. Really, depending on the economic times, recruiting in what I would say not necessarily impoverished areas but big cities, in areas where maybe the economy isn't good, if economic times are bad recruiting is very easy because people will just get to the point where look, I'm going to have a roof over my head, I got three squares a day. Here are the benefits I can receive out of going into the military. Is it worth it? When economic times are good, it's that much more difficult. I think around that time the economy was not necessarily bad, but in this area one of the things that we do is we go to the high schools and we recruit a lot of the high schoolers, especially seniors. One of the first things that happened in this area was we were banned from going onto the campuses.

01-00:43:50

Lage:

On all the high schools?

01-00:43:51

Thomas:

All the high schools in the Oakland and San Francisco area, could not step foot on—

01-00:43:56

Lage:

Or Berkeley?

01-00:43:57

Thomas:

Absolutely. Couldn't go to—actually, Berkeley, because we would try to get nurse recruits, things like that, so we were actually on the college campus there are Berkeley. Banned from campus.

01-00:44:13

Lage:

Oh, at the UC campus, yeah.

01-00:44:14

Thomas:

Yes, at UC Berkeley, banned from campus. So that made it pretty difficult, very difficult, but on the flip side of that we had recruiting stations out in the communities, and after the act of war started I would say for a good month, maybe more, I had to close at least one station per day because I had protestors trying to get inside the recruiting station, and if they would've

gotten inside they would have done damage to property and things like that, so at one point we were instructed to come to work and leave work in civilian clothes.

01-00:45:01

Lage: Wow! It was a lot of atmosphere there!

01-00:45:04

Thomas: Yeah, you know. We had I know over around Moffett Field one of the recruiters was actually shot at and run off the road, so it was pretty difficult. Of course, the recruiting numbers—we weren't recruiting a lot of people during those times.

01-00:45:22

Lage: Yeah, you didn't have the best territory for that kind of thing.

01-00:45:24

Thomas: No, for a lot of different reasons, but no, it was not a very good territory, not a good territory at all.

01-00:45:31

Lage: Did that affect your decision to get out?

01-00:45:34

Thomas: No, because after that I ended up going to Oakland Army Base and—

01-00:45:39

Lage: And doing some transportation work.

01-00:45:40

Thomas: Got back into the transportation—

01-00:45:41

Lage: Tell me about that since I'm supposed to be— you have such an interesting story that takes us away from Oakland, but tell me about that time which would have been—what year was that, '92 or '93?

01-00:45:52

Thomas: Actually, I got to Oakland Army Base in '91. I left the recruiting command and got to Oakland Army Base in '91. I believe it was probably around June-ish, May or June of '91, and I worked in the operations there.

01-00:46:15

Lage: On the docks?

01-00:46:16

Thomas: No, no, no. Actually, what's the best way to explain it? It's kind of funny, because the actual docks was a unit. They called it Military Ocean Terminal Bay Area, MOTBA, which was—they were the terminal, like you said, operators. Even though they were housed at Oakland Army Base and the actual headquarters was inside Building One, they were a subunit of the

Military Traffic Management Command. Now, the actual Military Traffic Management Command and their operations were separate than MOTBA. I was on the Military Traffic Management Command side in their operations division that had nothing—

01-00:47:03

Lage: Okay, the headquarters—

01-00:47:05

Thomas: That's correct.

01-00:47:06

Lage: —for not just Oakland but the west—

01-00:47:08

Thomas: The entire region, that's correct.

01-00:47:09

Lage: Okay. So what kinds of things did you do?

01-00:47:12

Thomas: You know, believe it or not, when I first got there the major thing that I did was I was the representative that helped organize the parade after Desert Storm that went down Broadway Street and it ended up down at Jack London Square, and we had tanks and all kinds of military equipment set up for people to just come and see what they're really like, and they could go up and take pictures. A lot of people were posing with the troops, and we had a flyover. I think we had a B52 flyover, one of the B52 bombers. We had one of the B1 bombers flew over. We had all kinds of—I think we had another bomber, I think it was the L1011 or something like that. I can't remember the name or the designation of the airplane, but lots of different aircraft, helicopters. We had tanks rolling down Broadway Street in Oakland.

01-00:48:14

Lage: I can't picture it, and I lived here then! [laughter]

01-00:48:16

Thomas: Oh, yeah, and we blocked off from I think it was around—jeez, I think the street was in the forties, Thirty-Fifth Street, you know, the block where Sears is.

01-00:48:30

Lage: Yeah, I think that's Twenty-Seventh, if I remember.

01-00:48:33

Thomas: From there all the way to Jack London Square, and again, we had several different military vehicles—

01-00:48:39

Lage: Did you work yourself with the City of Oakland at all?

01-00:48:42
Thomas: We worked with the Chamber of Commerce, the City of Oakland.

01-00:48:46
Lage: Who was the mayor then?

01-00:48:49
Thomas: Elihu Harris.

01-00:48:49
Lage: Elihu Harris, yeah, interesting. And was that a smooth interaction?

01-00:48:57
Thomas: For the most part, yeah.

01-00:49:00
Lage: I mean, because still it wasn't a popular war. Maybe people were glad it was over!

01-00:49:02
Thomas: Wasn't a popular war, and there were a lot of things going on that had happened. There was one kid who had went in the Army—he was in the Marines—who they called him up and he refused to go and there was a lot of things going on there. I can't remember whether he showed up at the parade, but there was something that was going on that kind of conflicted with the parade. But no, the city, the city government for the most part cooperated 100 percent with us. The city government pretty much deferred to the City Chamber of Commerce. Rear Admiral—oh my God, I can't believe I just forgot his name. It'll come to me, but he was the head of the Oakland City Chamber of Commerce.

01-00:50:01
Lage: Chamber of Commerce, wow. So he understood.

01-00:50:04
Thomas: He understood it. There were a lot of people on the Chamber of Commerce who were prior service, but it wasn't just Oakland Army Base. We had the Coast Guard, we had the Navy. I mean, every military organization in the area was involved in the planning of it, and it was a really neat experience. I got a chance to kind of rub elbows with a lot of the bigwigs here in Oakland, and a lot of generals, a lot of their representatives. But it was a full-time job.

01-00:50:35
Lage: I'll bet! How long did you work on that?

01-00:50:37
Thomas: I think it was about five months, and—

01-00:50:43
Lage: And how did it come off? Did a lot of public people come?

- 01-00:50:44
Thomas: Oh, streets were lined. I can't even remember how many people actually attended, but it was deep. The entire route was just lined with people. One of the interesting things was there was one group that had I think it was like a Mustang club and they had all these convertible Mustangs, and a lot of the dignitaries were to go into the Mustangs and sit on the—
- 01-00:51:18
Lage: Convertibles, kind of sit on—
- 01-00:51:20
Thomas: Right, they had convertibles, sit on the back there, and they would come down. And when everybody lined up, the mayor was supposed to be in the first car, and he refused. And again, it was a political thing; he decided that he would just go to the podium, but he was not going to be in the parade.
- 01-00:51:39
Lage: Was this because he thought it might be unpopular, the military aspect of it?
- 01-00:51:44
Thomas: I think it was just his own political statement, and there were a lot of people who were very upset about it. It was—
- 01-00:51:52
Lage: When you say a lot of people, you mean in the military?
- 01-00:51:54
Thomas: The military side, a lot of the organizers that were—
- 01-00:51:58
Lage: Or the Chamber of Commerce.
- 01-00:51:59
Thomas: The Chamber—well, yeah. Rear Admiral {Tony?}, I believe was his name, and I think they were disappointed because they had done so much planning. If, in fact, that was the way that he felt then I think that they felt that he should've just said, "I'm not going to participate, I'll just go to the podium," but he didn't let anybody know that, so we had a car with his name on it ready to go down, and he was not in it.
- 01-00:52:26
Lage: So did you just pull the car?
- 01-00:52:28
Thomas: No.
- 01-00:52:39
Lage: You drove it empty?
- 01-00:52:30
Thomas: We drove it empty!

01-00:52:31
Lage: Oh, wow! That is a statement then.

01-00:52:33
Thomas: Well, he made his statement, we made ours! [laughter]

01-00:52:37
Lage: Oh, that's so interesting!

01-00:52:38
Thomas: So yeah, I did that for a while, and then—

01-00:52:41
Lage: So that was sort of public relations.

01-00:052:43
Thomas: Absolutely.

01-00:52:44
Lage: Maybe recruiting is public relations, too.

01-00:52:47
Thomas: Recruiting is marketing, sales and marketing, absolutely. In fact, when you go into the Recruiting Command you're actually sent to a special school, because that's not something that in the military that you do.

01-00:53:04
Lage: Sales.

01-00:53:05
Thomas: Sales and marketing you don't—I mean, that's just not what we're taught to do, so you're sent to a special school, given courses on how to do it, and you go from there.

01-00:53:18
Lage: Now, you hear stories about recruiters kind of misleading people. I mean, there's been a lot of that with the Iraq War now. Was that something that you experienced?

01-00:53:32
Thomas: I never personally experienced it, but recruiting is a very high-pressure environment.

01-00:53:42
Lage: Do you have quotas?

01-00:53:43
Thomas: You have a quota, absolutely, and there's a lot of pressure, and it's kind of ironic because the people that they have go into the recruiting command, the enlisted soldiers that actually go out into the communities, in their specialties, in their military specialties are the cream of the crop. These guys are at the top

of their game, and then they're brought into the recruit command and they're basically told they're a slug and they're treated like a slug.

01-00:54:16

Lage: Now why is that?

01-00:54:17

Thomas: You know, I can never understand it.

01-00:54:19

Lage: It's just the culture of the recruiting?

01-00:54:20

Thomas: It's the culture of it, absolutely, and I'm embarrassed to say that I'm still in contact with recruiters from time to time and nothing has changed. Nothing has changed! I mean, the worst job in the Army. You have recruiters who will volunteer to go into a war zone rather than go into recruiting.

01-00:54:41

Lage: Now, how did you get into recruiting then?

01-00:54:43

Thomas: It was just an assignment that I ended up getting.

01-00:54:46

Lage: Yeah. You didn't seek it out?

01-00:54:49

Thomas: You know, it's funny. When I got ready to come back from Germany, you have an assignments officer; my assignments officer, the first place that they offered to me was Fort Polk, Louisiana, and I thought about it. I was in an interracial marriage; Fort Polk, Louisiana just didn't seem like the right place to be to me! [laughter] So I decided, well, if I have a choice I really don't want to go there, so I ended up coming to the recruiting command, and again, I knew what I was getting myself into, but even having said that I didn't know what I was getting myself into.

01-00:55:33

Lage: Yeah, until you actually do it.

01-00:55:34

Thomas: It's hard to describe, it really is, and when you're talking about our soldiers and you're talking about the way they're being treated out there and what they have to go through—I mean, one of the sayings that's prevalent is you have your quota, at the end of the month have you made your quota; if the answer is yes, on the end of the month you're considered a hero, so on the thirtieth of the month you're a hero, on the first of the month you know what you are? You're a zero.

01-00:56:06

Lage: The slug again!

01-00:56:07

Thomas:

Until you give me somebody, you're a slug. Get back out there and find me somebody. And unfortunately, people's careers get ruined. Here's a person, they're a sergeant, sergeant first class; they're looking at making a career of it, and careers get ruined.

01-00:56:28

Lage:

Now, did you have to play the role of the tough guy, because you were kind of in charge?

01-00:56:31

Thomas:

You know, it's kind of funny; that's one of the things that is expected of you, and there are times when you have to. You have to make an assessment of is the guy really out there giving his honest effort, and to me, the way I looked at it, if the guy's giving an honest effort, he's got the tools that he needs, he's out there doing it, you cannot force someone to come into the Army. I mean, you can't hold a gun to their head and make them do it, so if the guy's doing an honest effort but he's in a bad recruiting area, here's a person who may have taken ten or fifteen kids during the course of a month to go and take the ASVAB test and nobody passes.

01-00:57:19

Lage:

Which isn't his fault.

01-00:57:21

Thomas:

That's not his fault. In the recruiting command—well, he's recruiting in the wrong area, he's not going to the right places. Well, anyone who says that has never been to Oakland, has never been to this area, so a lot of the kids that are looking to possibly go into the Army tried to go there for a reason, and a lot of the times they don't necessarily have the tools to score fifty or above on the ASVAB test, which is not—I'm not saying that in a demeaning way, but—

01-00:57:56

Lage:

Well, nobody's extolled the schools for one thing!

01-00:57:59

Thomas:

I know, and unfortunately that's a huge part of the problem is that these standardized tests that are given, if you're coming from a school system that is not very high, you start sitting down and doing the math and the English and stuff like that and you're a little bit nervous to begin with and then you start taking it and you start not knowing the answers to the questions, you just start digging a hole, and before you know it the kid just pretty much gives up, and again, a little more confidence, a little bit better school, you would have a completely different environment. But my whole thing was if the guy's out there doing the best he can and I know he's doing the best he can, I can't ask any more of him. And then the people—there were ways that you could tell who was not giving it their best, and sometimes yeah, you'd have to bring them in your office and say, "Look, here are the things that I see. You're either going to clean them up or you're going to force my hand. I don't want

to do this, but if you force my hand, trust me, I will do it.” I had a major whose expression was, “Better thee than me!” [laughter]

01-00:59:19

Lage: Because you’re getting pressure from above yourself!

01-00:59:20

Thomas: Oh, absolutely! Absolutely.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 thomas_michael_2_02-06-09.wav

02-00:00:02

Lage: Okay, we’re back on, tape two, and I think unless you have more to say about recruiting, which is very interesting—

02-00:00:14

Thomas: Well, again, it’s just kind of an interesting side of the military that a lot of people don’t understand. They just see the recruiter out there peddling their wares, basically, and they don’t understand the pressure that that recruiter is under. I think if they really knew, they’d be a lot nicer to them, not necessarily that they would go into the Army just to make this guy’s life a little bit better, but they would treat him a lot differently, because sometimes kids will, “Oh, yeah, I’m interested in the Army,” and they’ll get them tested, the guy scores high on the test, and they’ll get them all the way to the point where they’re almost in, and then they’ll decide, “No, I don’t want to do this.” Well, you have to understand you’re dealing with teenagers to begin with, so you’re going to get a certain amount of that, but some of the kids have no interest in it at all.

02-00:01:14

Lage: Do they do it just to play along, you think?

02-00:01:15

Thomas: Pretty much, and it’s a detriment, it’s a waste of the recruiter’s time, it’s a waste of resources, because every time they do something that costs money, so—

02-00:01:27

Lage: It’s a tough line of work.

02-00:01:28

Thomas: It’s a very tough line of work, absolutely.

02-00:01:31

Lage: And I hadn’t realized the pressure aspect from inside. So you got out of—I think I asked you this but I’m not sure—did you get out of recruiting before you decided to leave the military, or was this all one big—?

02-00:01:48

Thomas:

No, I got out of recruiting and I went to Oakland Army Base. I did about two and a half years at Oakland Army Base before I actually got off of active duty. I went from the operations center to reserve affairs, and what I did there was—this was, again, right after Desert Storm, and we had a lot of reservists on active duty, and even though the war effort was done the transportation side of it was just enormous. We were retrograding all the equipment back, and—

02-00:02:29

Lage:

That took as long as the war?

02-00:02:31

Thomas:

Longer, much longer.

02-00:02:37

Lage:

So you kept reservists on duty there.

02-00:02:39

Thomas:

We had reservists on duty for almost continuous—back in those days you could only hold a reservist on active duty for 179 days, so what they would do is you go 179 days, then you would be released from active duty for one day, and then they would be put back on orders for another 179 days.

02-00:03:01

Lage:

So you could do that.

02-00:03:03

Thomas:

But the crazy thing is legally if something happened on that one day, you were not covered.

02-00:03:12

Lage:

By any military insurance?

02-00:03:14

Thomas:

That's correct. So I am not kidding you, there were people on that one day, the day prior to they get all the food they need, everything they needed to exist that one day, they would go into their room, stay in their room, watch TV the entire day. They wouldn't leave, just to make sure nothing happened.

02-00:03:31

Lage:

They were cautious!

02-00:03:34

Thomas:

They had to be. Actually, now that I think back during that time, the economy was not that good, so you had a lot of people volunteering.

02-00:03:43

Lage:

So they were glad to be reinstated.

02-00:03:44
Thomas: Absolutely. They were fighting to stay on active duty, because not only were they covered but their families were covered.

02-00:03:53
Lage: And you're talking about health insurance?

02-00:03:56
Thomas: Health insurance, health, dental, the entire—they could go—

02-00:03:59
Lage: Life insurance.

02-00:04:01
Thomas: They could go to the Post Exchange, they could go to the commissaries. Even though a lot of the people were stationed here in Oakland, their family might be in Washington State, but they may be near Fort Lewis, Washington, so they would get their wives and family ID cards, and they could go to the Post Exchange, and it's a huge discount.

02-00:04:23
Lage: Yeah. Now, did you live on the base at this point?

02-00:04:26
Thomas: I lived on Fort Mason.

02-00:04:29
Lage: Oh, you did!

02-00:04:30
Thomas: Well, what's funny is that when I was in the recruiting command I lived at the Presidio. Battery Caulfield is like the back side of the Presidio, they used to have a hospital on the back side. A lot of people don't even know it, but it's shut down, but years ago they did a lot of things back there.

02-00:04:53
Lage: In addition to Letterman.

02-00:04:55
Thomas: In addition to Letterman. I think that they used to do—I don't think that they were necessarily involved with the military. I think it was called like the General Hospital, and I think it was mostly civilians. In fact, Richard Gere had a movie where he was in a hospital. I'm trying to remember—I think he was with Michelle Pfeiffer—but they actually filmed that movie in that hospital.

02-00:05:24
Lage: Oh, really?

02-00:05:25
Thomas: Yeah. But we were living on the Presidio, and the housing was not that good. It was—

02-00:05:33

Lage: Run down, or—?

02-00:05:34

Thomas: It was told to me that they built these houses—or actually they were apartments, townhouses—they built them during the Korean War, and they were built basically to last like five or ten years. There was not even a foundation. The tile was on sand. It was unbelievable. Anyway, at Fort Mason they had beautiful housing. I mean, if you ever get a chance, right off of Bay and Franklin Street, if you're on Bay make a right-hand turn at Franklin at the light, and on the right-hand side when you go in there are duplexes, beautiful, full basements. I mean, they're huge! And I happened to just, for nostalgia's sake, I happened to just drive on Fort Mason, and I was driving around, and I'm looking, and all of these duplexes were empty, and a lot of it had to do with, again, there was a draw down of people, they didn't have as many officers, and there was no one living in these places, but there were several what they called "company grade" officers, being captain and below, who worked for Oakland Army Base, but we were being housed in these horrible houses and town homes on the Presidio. So I went to the colonels and I said, "You know what? We've got these quarters sitting here. No one's living in them. I know that they're designated for field grade officers. We don't have enough field grade officers to occupy them. Why are we going to leave them vacant? Why can't you move the captains into these quarters?" And I went to the engineers, and I said to them, "From a maintenance standpoint, is it better to leave these things vacant, or is it better to have someone in them, actually use the water so the pipes don't rust and things like that?" He says they would rather have someone in them, because as they get used it's actually less maintenance for them. So I was able to convince—

02-00:07:40

Lage: You had your arguments!

02-00:07:41

Thomas: I went there and I pled my case, and I was the first company grade officer to move in there, and probably within a year almost all the quarters there were occupied.

02-00:07:55

Lage: Great. So you're back at Fort Mason—

02-00:07:56

Thomas: Back at Fort Mason, right across the street from where I lived when I was in college. Now, it's funny because you got the duplexes on the right-hand side, and on the left-hand side we used to call it the horseshoe, and they're single houses; they're basically mansions, from the standpoint of the size of what you would normally consider a house in San Francisco, these were mansions. Even back in the seventies, I think they had them appraised and they were over a million dollars back in those days. They have full basements, they have a garage, they have a yard with sprinkler system. The house that we lived in

when I was in college was four bedrooms with a what they called the maid's quarters downstairs, which was another bedroom with a full bath. They're huge. Hardwood floors. Just amazing, amazing quarters.

02-00:08:52

Lage: And who lived there when you were in the apartments, the townhouses?

02-00:08:56

Thomas: Colonels. The colonels lived there. But in fact, I think the last time that I was around that area, they're actually owned by the Park Service now, and they rent them out, and I believe the house that we were living in they rent out. They subdivided the rooms, and I think they rented out for about \$10,000 a month. Yeah, it's amazing, but they're huge. But again, I would say even the duplex that I was living in, the square footage on that is well over 2,000 square feet.

02-00:09:38

Lage: So these were the toney places for military officers, it sounds like.

02-00:09:42

Thomas: One of the best-kept secrets in the military! [laughter] Seriously, from a housing standpoint—I mean, I can still remember when we first showed up, having just moved out from Maryland, and we go driving in there, and my dad pulls up in front of this—they're white houses, and we pull up in front of this huge white house, and my brother and I are looking at each other like, "Why is Dad stopping here?" So he gets out and walks up to the door with a key and opens the door, and we're like, "You got to be kidding!" And we walked in and looked around. "You're living here? Holy smokes!"

02-00:10:21

Lage: Were they well kept up?

02-00:10:22

Thomas: Absolutely.

02-00:10:23

Lage: And were they furnished? Or you bought your own furniture.

02-00:10:27

Thomas: Your own furniture, which my mom really liked because that meant that she could go out and do some shopping and furnish it!

02-00:10:35

Lage: It was probably bigger! She needed new—

02-00:10:37

Thomas: Oh yeah, she needed to go out and get some more things to put in the different rooms. So the housing there was just incredible. I always tell people, if I wanted to know what it was going to be like that particular day as far as the weather, I'd wake up—I had a window to my right—I'd wake up and I'd look

out the window. If I could see the Golden Gate Bridge, then it was going to be a good day. If it was fogged in, I knew it was going to be cold.

02-00:11:05

Lage: No wonder you wanted to stay living at home in college!

02-00:11:08

Thomas: What a rough life!

02-00:11:09

Lage: Yeah, yeah! I see now! When you did that reservist affairs, was that the kind of—? What did you do? Helping them—?

02-00:11:23

Thomas: Believe it or not, it was more human resources type work where we cut the orders for them to stay on active duty. We took care of any problems, administrative problems that they were having. If they needed assistance as far as anything to do with their families, we did that, and there were so many of them. Again, we had a reserve affairs officer who was a major, myself, and two admin specialists, and a secretary, and we were going from the time that we got there in the morning until the time we left.

02-00:12:04

Lage: Now, were these admin specialists civilians?

02-00:12:06

Thomas: Civilians, that's correct.

02-00:12:07

Lage: Now, how did that work, the civilians and military people?

02-00:12:08

Thomas: Well, the Military Traffic Management Command had considerably more civilians than they did military.

02-00:12:18

Lage: Was the relationship close or strained or—?

02-00:12:20

Thomas: Oh, hand in hand. Hand in hand, yeah. In fact, a lot of the relationships as far as who was the boss, the civilian was the boss and the military person was basically the subordinate.

02-00:12:36

Lage: Really?

02-00:12:37

Thomas: Absolutely.

02-00:12:38

Lage: So did you have someone over you in the—?

02-00:12:40
Thomas: I had a military person over me.

02-00:12:47
Lage: Let's see, you were a captain?

02-00:12:48
Thomas: I was a captain, but I had an Air Force colonel was actually my senior {rater?}, and a Reserve major was my {rater?}.

02-00:13:00
Lage: Now, does {rater?} mean supervisor?

02-00:13:01
Thomas: Supervisor, and every year you were required to get an efficiency report, and in that efficiency report you have a {rater?} and then you have a senior {rater?}, so you have two people basically giving the military, the Army, their opinion of your job performance for that year.

02-00:13:24
Lage: But you didn't have a civilian doing that?

02-00:13:27
Thomas: No, not at that time. Now, when I was in the Reserves and I was working in public affairs I had my {rater?} was a civilian and my senior {rater?} was a colonel.

02-00:13:39
Lage: Now when did that happen? Have we said enough about that period through '93 when you left active duty? Is there more to tell about what you remember about the base?

02-00:13:51
Thomas: Well, because when I left reserve affairs I became the detachment commander at Oakland Army Base.

02-00:13:59
Lage: Now what's detachment—?

02-00:14:00
Thomas: That's the garrison unit.

02-00:14:02
Lage: Oh, you were commander of the whole garrison?

02-00:14:04
Thomas: I wasn't commander of the garrison. The commander of the garrison was a colonel, full bird colonel, and—

02-00:14:10
Lage: What does full bird mean?

- 02-00:14:11
Thomas: That's a full colonel. There's a lieutenant colonel, who wears a silver oak leaf, and then there's a colonel who wears the eagle.
- 02-00:14:20
Lage: Oh, I see, and that's why they're called the full bird, okay. I'm learning about the military here!
- 02-00:14:29
Thomas: Colonel Walterhouse was the full bird colonel who was in charge of the garrison.
- 02-00:14:35
Lage: So you went from headquarters to the garrison?
- 02-00:14:40
Thomas: That's correct. And my job, I was the commander over—believe it or not, I was the commander of the general, because the general, his records, all of his administrative type, military administrative things went through me.
- 02-00:14:59
Lage: Now, where's the general?
- 02-00:15:00
Thomas: The general was the commander of the Military Traffic Management Command, but he has to be assigned to a unit for administrative purposes, so he was a member of my unit. It's kind of a funny thing.
- 02-00:15:16
Lage: I see, well, that's very interesting! You think of military being extremely hierarchical, and there are these—
- 02-00:15:20
Thomas: He was my commander, but in a roundabout way I was kind of his not necessarily his commander—
- 02-00:15:27
Lage: You didn't tell him what to do?
- 02-00:15:29
Thomas: Oh, absolutely not! But it's kind of an odd relationship when you have organizations like that, but like when he would have to do administrative things—
- 02-00:15:39
Lage: Did you have to sign off on **{inaudible}**?
- 02-00:15:42
Thomas: Like physical fitness tests, things like that, again, all of the little admin things that they have to do. Like if you went to the firing range to qualify for a

weapon, that was me, but most of the troops that I had were military policemen.

02-00:16:01

Lage: Oh! Did you oversee them?

02-00:16:04

Thomas: Yes. Well, I didn't necessarily have anything to do with their day-to-day operation, but if a guy was overweight I had to take care of it. Again, all of the administrative things, that's what we did. So that made it kind of interesting.

02-00:16:23

Lage: Yeah. Did you like that work?

02-00:16:27

Thomas: I was dealing with troops. I mean, when you're an officer in the Army, if you don't like being with troops then you don't need to be in there, to be honest with you.

02-00:16:35

Lage: Do you have to be a people person? There's a lot of paper pushing, but you also—

02-00:16:39

Thomas: A lot of paper pushing—it depends. You know, I've always said there's two types of officers, and some are leaders and some are managers, and I considered myself more of a people person leader type, and I can do the admin stuff, I know it's got to be done. I didn't really like it a lot. I enjoyed being out there with the troops and doing that type of stuff.

02-00:17:03

Lage: Well, did this job allow you to be out there with the troops?

02-00:17:06

Thomas: Oh, absolutely. Believe it or not, one of the funny things—

02-00:17:09

Lage: Give me an example, yeah.

02-00:17:12

Thomas: One of the funny things that happened during that time, about every nightclub, like disco dancing type of nightclub in the Oakland area closed because they were having so much violence that no one was willing to even do anything. There was a club on the Army Base called the Crosswinds club.

02-00:17:37

Lage: I've heard of it!

02-00:17:40

Thomas: On Friday nights they would open up the Crosswinds to anybody who wanted to come on.

02-00:17:48
Lage: From the civilian world.

02-00:17:50
Thomas: Yeah.

02-00:17:51
Lage: Now how did that work?

02-00:17:52
Thomas: Oh, it was a mess! It was an absolute mess. I mean, it got down to every car, every vehicle that came on was searched. There were times when we would come out with drug sniffing dogs. Everyone got wanded. At the entrance of the Crosswinds club was a metal detector. There were all kinds of things going on in that club that you would not expect to be going on on a military base.

02-00:18:22
Lage: Like? Even with this careful searching?

02-00:18:26
Thomas: Drugs, prostitution—

02-00:18:28
Lage: Wow. This was in the early nineties?

02-00:18:31
Thomas: 1992. There were a lot of things going on, and what I would do is at least once or twice a month I would go out there with my MPs and we would be out there until four o'clock in the morning, and I'd be out there with them.

02-00:18:55
Lage: Just checking in?

02-00:18:56
Thomas: Well, you know, my own opinion was that I didn't think that that was necessary. You have to understand, that place made a lot of money. That place was packed every night. Every Friday night there was a line to get in because you had the occupancy limit. Oh, it would meet that every Friday night, and—

02-00:19:28
Lage: And a lot of people coming from—?

02-00:19:30
Thomas: Downtown Oakland. I'm trying to remember—you know the singing group En Vogue? There's a female singing group, En Vogue, used to come to that club, from what I understand. I never saw them, but they used to come to the club, just coming to dance. This was before they hit it big, and—

02-00:19:54
Lage: Did you have live entertainment?

02-00:19:56
Thomas: No, it was just a DJ. Just a DJ.

02-00:19:58
Lage: Now, was it your opinion that they didn't need to allow civilians on?

02-00:20:02
Thomas: Not in that capacity, because a lot of the elements—you have to understand that there was a housing area not too far away—

02-00:20:10
Lage: Project like—

02-00:20:12
Thomas: No, the military housing area, and these guys would be leaving at three o'clock in the morning, two, three o'clock in the morning, and they're driving fast, and we'd have to hunt them down to make sure that they didn't stay on the base.

02-00:20:27
Lage: I'm surprised that the Army allowed it. It didn't have to be made open to the public. What was the deal?

02-00:20:34
Thomas: It made a lot of money.

02-00:20:35
Lage: Who for, though?

02-00:20:36
Thomas: The base, for the club system.

02-00:20:39
Lage: I see. So that allowed—

02-00:20:41
Thomas: They took that money and they were able to do different things with it. It didn't just benefit the club, it benefited the base, and they just made the assessment that it was worth the risk, and it was a huge risk, it really was. And again, my feeling was that if my soldiers have to be out here dealing with what they have to deal with, then I'll make the effort to be out here with them, even though I'm not a military policeman.

02-00:21:08
Lage: Right, it sounds more like something that the chief of military police should've been doing!

02-00:21:13
Thomas: He was there. Now, the actual head of the military police was a civilian, and he would be there also, but again, from my standpoint, from a leadership standpoint, my troops needed to know that I understood what they went

through trying to deal with the people that they were dealing with, so I'd go out there on Friday night and again, it was really interesting. Some of the things that you would see going on there, you would just say, "This has no place on an Army base." So eventually—I'm trying to remember, I can't remember what actually finally stopped them from having that, but they finally shut it down, which trust me, the people in the housing area, they liked that, because it was just not a good situation.

02-00:22:07

Lage: Yeah, it doesn't sound like a good place to raise families around.

02-00:22:12

Thomas: No. And again, it was only one night a week, and a lot of the people who lived in the housing area were the military police, so they definitely wanted to take care of their community, so— And I don't think we—we never had anyone shot. I don't think we ever had anybody knifed or anything like that, but you would have people beating each other up. You'd have a few fistfights and things like that, but yeah, it was, again, something that I didn't think needed to be on the base. But I was just a captain, it wasn't my decision! My job was to go out and make sure that the base was safe, so that's what we did.

02-00:22:52

Lage: Well, that's an interesting little sidelight on that time period! Anything else that you'd want to mention about that time period?

02-00:23:02

Thomas: Well, it was just kind of—I felt sad when they decided to close down Oakland Army Base just because a lot of the people that were there I knew from the time that I was seventeen, eighteen years old, and they were still there—

02-00:23:20

Lage: Civilian people.

02-00:22:20

Thomas: Civilian people, and I—

02-00:23:22

Lage: How did you get to know them when you weren't living there?

02-00:23:25

Thomas: Because some of these people worked for my dad, so it was kind of ironic that here are people who worked for my dad, and then fifteen years later here I come around.

02-00:23:37

Lage: Yeah, and they're still working there.

02-00:23:39

Thomas: They're still there.

02-00:23:40

Lage: And they lost those jobs.

02-00:23:42

Thomas: A lot of them ended up going back to Fort Eustis, because they moved everything to Fort Eustis, Virginia. Some of them picked up and moved back to Fort Eustis. Some of them, believe it or not, ended up out at Concord Naval Weapons Station. There is a detachment there—I'm trying to remember the name of the unit—but this company, American President Lines, at one time we had the contract to do the stevedoring for the Army unit that's out there, so I went out there being prior service and having worked at Oakland Army Base and knowing the people out there, of course, I was a natural fit to go out there and work on the operations, but again, I run into people who I knew when I was seventeen. Now I'm in my forties. Dealt with them as a military dependent, then dealt with them as a military person. Actually did a couple of tours in the reserves out there, and now I'm back as a civilian contractor stevedore doing operations with them, so yeah.

02-00:24:55

Lage: Interesting. Well, when you became a reservist, did you always do your reserve duty in this area? That's like a two week a year—

02-00:25:05

Thomas: Two weeks a year, and the first couple of tours I did here at Oakland Army Base, and then, of course, they moved Oakland Army Base, and I think the first year I went out to Concord, after they moved I went out to Concord. Then I went and I did one or two tours at Fort Eustis, and then I did another tour out here at Concord doing some different things, and then the last tour that I did in the reserves was a month after 9/11.

02-00:25:42

Lage: Oh, wow, and where'd you do that?

02-00:25:44

Thomas: Fort Eustis, and it was totally in response to the World Trade Center catastrophe, and they called me up and said, "Can you come on active duty?" I said, "If you need me, I'm there," and went back to do my two weeks. And it was kind of funny—the last day that I was there they said, "Well, we're thinking about keeping you here for 365 days." "Well, if you need me, I know the stakes, that's part of the game. If you need me, I'll do it, I just want to make sure I'm doing something. I don't want to just be sitting here shoveling paper around and doing nothing. I mean, if you have a real job for me, I am here." And what ended up happening was the colonel who had to sign off on it basically asked the question, "What specifically is he doing? Does he have a specific job?" They said, "Well, we could find something for him to do," and he says, "That's not good enough," so he said, "Send him back." And when you think about it, when you bring a person on for 365 days it's a big financial endeavor for the government. I was a major in the reserves, so I get majors' salary, which is not a bad chunk of change, but there's other things. They

would have to take on my family, as far as their healthcare. There's some financial things because I owned a house; there's variable housing allowance. It gets to be quite a pretty big expense.

02-00:27:22

Lage: So they really need to need you.

02-00:27:24

Thomas: Yeah, you need to do a cost analysis and see if that person is really worth bringing on active duty, and the colonel just said, "No, we're not going to do this," so I ended up coming back home.

02-00:27:33

Lage: Wow. Now you told me one of your reserve duties was at Oakland Army Base at the time when the base was being closed down.

02-00:27:41

Thomas: That's correct.

02-00:27:42

Lage: It must have been '99. Would it have been? That's when they had the ceremony closing it, in September, and Colonel Compisi was the {inaudible}. I interviewed him!

02-00:27:53

Thomas: Really? Did you come to the office? Did you come to his office?

02-00:27:58

Lage: Yeah, down on the peninsula. He works on the peninsula. Mountain View.

02-00:28:05

Thomas: Okay, you mean you interviewed him just recently.

02-00:28:10

Lage: Yeah, just a month ago.

02-00:28:11

Thomas: Okay, I thought maybe you'd done it—

02-00:28:13

Lage: Oh no, no, no, a month ago!

02-00:28:14

Thomas: Because basically, there was just a skeleton crew at Oakland Army Base at the time, and everyone that was there had some function to do as far as closing the base down, and mine—I was a public relations officer, so I was kind of heading the public relations part of it, as far as notifying the media. We had ads on KGO radio, a lot of different radio stations—that one just happens to come to mind.

02-00:28:46

Lage: When you say ads, about the ceremony?

02-00:28:49
Thomas: Just the ceremony.

02-00:28:49
Lage: Okay, so you were helping prepare for it?

02-00:28:51
Thomas: That's correct, news releases. I got the programs together for the actual ceremony. There were some other arrangements that had to be made, because Jerry Brown was the mayor at the time and he came in and spoke at the ceremony.

02-00:29:09
Lage: Did you help facilitate any of that?

02-00:29:11
Thomas: Oh, absolutely, as far as the arrangements, whatever special arrangements that needed to be made as far as security, and making sure they had the directions and the timeliness of it and all that kind of stuff, all the pomp and circumstance of having the mayor there. But there were a number of different dignitaries that were there.

02-00:29:34
Lage: Did Ron Dellums come to that?

02-00:29:36
Thomas: I don't think Ron Dellums was there. I think Dellums may have still been back in Washington at the time.

02-00:29:40
Lage: He probably was. I just thought maybe because it was his district.

02-00:29:43
Thomas: I don't remember him being there. He could have been, but I don't remember him being there. But again, there was such a rich history of people who had served at Oakland Army Base that were still in the area. One of the major things was trying to get information out to them and extending invitations to them to come to the ceremony, and that was a huge, huge endeavor, because, I mean, we had to produce—as a matter of fact, believe it or not, I still have the list, the invitee list—I should have brought it—I have the invitee list for the ceremony, and it was really a family reunion of people.

02-00:30:35
Lage: Yeah, civilian and military or—?

02-00:30:36
Thomas: Civilian and military, retired military. Yeah, it was a—

02-00:30:41
Lage: Did your dad come?

02-00:30:42

Thomas:

No, he wasn't able to make it out, but some of the colonels that lived next door to us when I was a kid, they were there and I got a chance to run into them, but some of those guys I knew anyway from the National Defense Transportation Association, the NDTA. When I was at Oakland Army Base I was a member of NDTA, so we would have meetings and I would see them at those meetings.

02-00:31:07

Lage:

So that was a way of keeping in touch and stuff, yeah. So how did you observe kind of the mood of both the personnel on the base and the city and port?

02-00:31:19

Thomas:

Yeah, they were all intertwined. From the military side, there was a lot of sadness. I mean, at different points in time, going all the way back to World War II—actually I think it may have even been—yeah, World War II was when it really took off. Soldiers were being put on ships and shipped over to the Far East. There's actually a lot of pictures and things like that—I'm not sure if you've gotten a chance to see any of that.

02-00:31:50

Lage:

I think some of them yeah.

02-00:31:54

Thomas:

But so it had such a rich history, and then during the Vietnam War, I mean, that base was just almost twenty-four/seven had something going on, and then even after that, just the upkeep of shipping things overseas from military cargo to the AAFES, the base exchange cargo that was being run out of the warehouses there, so much had happened, and—

02-00:32:23

Lage:

And there was a sense of that, it sounds like.

02-00:32:25

Thomas:

There was a sense of that, and you could see there was a huge sense of pride by the people who showed up, because they knew that they had come and done a very good job. But there was a lot of sadness because it's like this place is going away, and—

02-00:32:43

Lage:

Anger? Any anger at it?

02-00:32:45

Thomas:

No, I think more—again, it was just sadness. I don't think it was anger. You know, things change, and you get around the active duty military or the civilians and one of the things you learn to deal with in the military is change. So they understood that that's what was going to happen, there was nothing they could do to change it, and then just go and celebrate it and just be there for the ceremony.

02-00:33:16

Lage: So it must have been nice to be a part of that.

02-00:33:18

Thomas: Yeah, it was, it was. Again, I considered myself kind of a second-generation person coming through, and having a certain amount of history there. It was fun in the sense that I could do it, but again, for my own self it was kind of sad. I mean, when they played the Reveille when they brought the flag down for the last time, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. But it was something else. But as far as the Port of Oakland, I mean, they were looking at it in a completely different sense. Here they were getting this great piece of property, and there was an economic boost that they were seeing, so—

02-00:34:06

Lage: Yeah, and the city, too, I think was—

02-00:34:09

Thomas: Oh, absolutely.

02-00:34:10

Lage: Now, when you left the military—that was '93—did you get right into the transport field?

02-00:34:20

Thomas: Came right here.

02-00:34:20

Lage: Right to APL!

02-00:34:22

Thomas: I've been here ever since.

02-00:34:23

Lage: Oh, I didn't realize you'd been here that long.

02-00:34:25

Thomas: Been here since, yeah—

02-00:34:25

Lage: Okay, so what—just very briefly, what kind of work do you do for APL?

02-00:34:31

Thomas: I am what they call a marine superintendent, and what I do, one of my functions is I plan where the containers go on the big container ships. I have to pay attention to the size of the containers, what port they're going to, whether there's any hazardous type of material in them, whether they're refrigerated containers, and we stow them on the ship, and then we produce work plans to give to the stevedores, which are longshoremen. They go out and actually perform the work. They're all union guys. I'm not in the union; I can't actually go out and physically drive a truck or drive a crane or really instruct the longshoremen how to do their job, but I'm the supervisor.

02-00:35:20
Lage: You set up the plan.

02-00:35:21
Thomas: I set up the plan, I have all of the responsibility, but I have none of the power.

02-00:35:28
Lage: They don't report to you. Do they?

02-00:35:30
Thomas: Well, they have foremen that report to us, and the foremen go out there and make sure the longshoremen are—

02-00:35:41
Lage: Oversee.

02-00:35:42
Thomas: —oversee, and make sure they're doing what they're doing.

02-00:35:43
Lage: And how is that relationship between you as an APL and the foremen? Are the foremen union people?

02-00:35:51
Thomas: They're union. It all depends. I've been very, very fortunate in the—we call them walking bosses, same as foremen; I'm more comfortable calling them walking bosses, but that's just the term that we use. But the walking bosses that I've had—I predominantly work at night here, and I had a walking boss by the name of Ivan {Villa?}, and we got along great, and it's funny because his wife asked me one time how it was that we got along so well; I said, "Well, when we have problems, Ivan asks me what I think and then Ivan tells me what he thinks, and then we do what Ivan says!" [laughter] But the walking bosses have so much experience. I mean, Ivan had been on the waterfront longer than I'd been alive, so obviously he had a lot more experience, he had seen a lot more than I would ever hope to see. He was a very talented person, and I would present my whatever from the—

02-00:37:01
Lage: Your plan?

02-00:37:02
Thomas: Well, if there was a problem I'd say, "Okay, Ivan, this is what I see, this is what I think we should do because of these factors," and he would take a look at it and say, "Well, I understand that but here's what I think we can do. We will still accomplish this, but I will accomplish this, this, and this by doing it this way."

02-00:37:22
Lage: And you trusted him.

02-00:37:25

Thomas: Absolutely.

02-00:37:25

Lage: Is he still working?

02-00:37:26

Thomas: No, he retired I think about six years ago, but we still see him. He comes to different functions, and we see him, keep in touch with him. He's on what we call the longshore side. Then we have clerks, and we have what we call super cargo. The clerks are administrative people; they do all the documentation. And again, I was blessed with very good supercargoes: Don {Kava?}, Jim Donahue, Ray {Yi?}, and now I've got Howard Moore. Upstanding people, very easy to work with. It's kind of funny because when you're working in a union environment, the relationship that you have, especially with that first line of supervisor, is very important, because if there's animosity there you're never going to get anywhere, but if you've got people who have a common goal and are willing to work with each other—you know, every once in a while you get pissed off at each other and you can express it, but you don't keep it in. You can be pissed off this minute and two minutes later you're sitting around joking.

02-00:38:44

Lage: Now, did your military experience help you with this kind of thing?

02-00:38:47

Thomas: Absolutely. Absolutely. It's all about leading people. One of the things that you learn in the military is if you're honest with people and you're upfront with them and you let them know what the ballgame is right from the start, they may not like it but they can accept it.

02-00:39:05

Lage: Yeah. But of course, in the military they've got to do it, and here you've got a little bit more—

02-00:39:11

Thomas: Well, it's kind of funny because even in the military when you do certain things it helps to be able to accomplish your task if you have buy-in, so as an officer I might say, "Okay, we have to take that hill." Now, I've got sergeants that work for me, I've got lieutenants that work for me, if I'm the commander. I don't tell them how to take the hill; I give them the mission. If there are any time constraints that are there, I let them know what those are. I give them the mission statement, now execute it. They get back and they get with their sergeants, they come up with a plan. They get with their squad leaders, they get their input, they come up with a plan, they come back and present it, and that way at least everyone has the feeling that they have had their input, and when you come up with the ultimate plan that you're going to do it may not be something that everyone agrees on, but if they've given a chance to give their input, at least they know that the buy-in is there. They know that they've got

their input. Maybe they didn't know this or didn't know that so it doesn't apply to this particular situation, but their input was appreciated and it's something that may be taken into account the next time.

02-00:40:36

Lage: Is that the kind of thing you're taught in the military, in today's military?

02-00:40:41

Thomas: Honestly, I think I learned that more of just being around the officers that I was around when I was a kid. You just pick up on things. Again, my dad was—when I would say my formative years, he was a lieutenant colonel or above. I was around generals, other colonels, and you just learn a different way of doing things, and a lot of people think of these colonels as these hardcore, very authoritative people, and I saw them as something completely different. It's not that they couldn't be that way, and there are times when you really have to be that way, but that was the key. They weren't that way unless they had to.

02-00:41:38

Lage: Interesting. And it was much more listening?

02-00:41:41

Thomas: Listening, understanding, and it wasn't an act. It was genuine. They would sit there and they would listen to you, and there were times when they would sit there and listen to somebody and say, "You know what? I hadn't thought of that. Maybe that is a better way of doing it."

02-00:41:58

Lage: A good model.

02-00:42:00

Thomas: Absolutely. You know, it's one of these things where one person doesn't have the answer to every situation, and you have to be willing to say, "You know what? I was wrong," or "I may not have been wrong, my way would actually work; your way is better," and then say, "Let's go with your way," and then give the person credit for coming up with the idea. You know, give credit where credit's due, and again, those were the type of people that I saw and you would see them interact, even sometimes with their troops, and it's one of those things that not only do they do that in their professional lives, you'll see that in their personal lives also.

02-00:42:46

Lage: Relations with family and friends.

02-00:42:47

Thomas: Relations with family, relations with people in their communities. You know, right now there's this talk about volunteerism. It is so prevalent in a military community. I mean, you go to—especially with the kids—you're overseas, a lot of times you have football teams, basketball teams. Well, who are the coaches? These people are not getting paid! And a lot of the times you'll have

people who are single, they don't have any kids, they don't have any stake in this team, but they know that here are these kids, they don't have anything else to do, they will give their time and do it, and so you see that side of them.

02-00:43:36

Lage: It sounds like you have a very positive view and experience with the military.

02-00:43:41

Thomas: You know, a lot of people have a certain view of the military, and they just see it from the militaristic side of it, and up until recently, when you think about it, after the Vietnam War we didn't have a war until the Gulf War. You're talking almost thirty years before we were in any type of major conflict, so it was a peacetime army, and so a lot of the different communal aspects of military life became much more important, and it just became its own culture. But again, what I got from it was, again, what we were talking about in the beginning, you have so many people from so many different walks of life. You've got the white kid from Louisiana, who may have never even been within four feet of a black person, has no idea, only what he's been told. You've got a kid from Chicago who's been living in the projects and only sees white people on the bus and has no interaction with them at all, and all of a sudden they're sharing bunks.

02-00:45:02

Lage: Right, it's amazing!

02-00:45:04

Thomas: One's on the top bunk and one's on the bottom bunk, and they're being told that you two have got to learn a way to accept, live, and work together, and they get into an environment where first of all you get into basic training and you're so fearful of the drill sergeant that you will turn to anybody for help and assurance! And you know, it's kind of—they tell you, we break them down and then we build them back up, and one of the things that you do is you're taking people from all these different walks of life, and you're breaking them down and you're putting them in one walk of life, and that is we all have to work together to get something done here.

02-00:45:50

Lage: Now let me ask you: If there comes a time when the military is asked to accept gays in the military, do you think it will work the same way as it has with ethnic and racial and gender?

02-00:46:05

Thomas: You know, let me tell you what: anybody who thinks there hasn't been a number of gays in the military since the inception of this country, they're nuts!

02-00:46:18

Lage: True, true! But the hidden, now it's hidden! What if they say, "Okay, we accept you."

02-00:46:23

Thomas:

Well, let me tell you what. There has been gays in the military from the time I've been in the military who, let me put it, no public displays of affection on base but you knew they were gay. They didn't hide it. No one said anything, they did their job, they went about their business, and nothing was ever said, and that goes for—

02-00:46:53

Lage:

And were they accepted? Did people acknowledge it?

02-00:46:55

Thomas:

Absolutely. Absolutely, and I'm talking on both the enlisted and the officers side. It wasn't secret.

02-00:47:04

Lage:

Unspoken secret, kind of.

02-00:47:06

Thomas:

Pretty much, pretty much. I mean, again, can a person do their job? Yes.

02-00:47:12

Lage:

So you think it would work if the Don't Ask Don't Tell part would put—or do you think it would work?

02-00:47:20

Thomas:

Absolutely. I think that it's going on today, trust me.

02-00:47:26

Lage:

Yeah, but the Don't Ask Don't Tell is still there, and sometimes people are—

02-00:47:31

Thomas:

It's like a lot of things. **{inaudible}** Don't Ask Don't Tell, I think that if they came out tomorrow and said, "Okay, we are openly accepting gays in the military," it's not going to change the military.

02-00:47:45

Lage:

Not much would happen, you think.

02-00:47:47

Thomas:

No. I mean, there's going to be a certain amount of protest. Don't get me wrong—is there any homophobia in the military? Absolutely. I mean, the military is a cross-section of society. But for the most part, I think the majority of the people who are in the military would sit there and say, "Can this person do their job, whatever it is, whether it's pushing paper or shooting a weapon? If they can do their job, they do it effectively"—my view of it is I'm not gay, you can't make me gay, and with that I won't sleep with a gay person. [laughter] That's as far as it needs to go. So I'm a heterosexual, I will be heterosexual. If you're gay, you're gay.

02-00:48:41

Lage:

Right, it's not going to affect you then.

- 02-00:48:43
Thomas: It's not going to affect me, no more than me being heterosexual is going to affect a gay person.
- 02-00:48:49
Lage: Did you experience anything around having so many women enter the military? That happened during your time.
- 02-00:49:00
Thomas: Yes. In fact, I think my brother, when he was at West Point, that may have been one of the first classes that had females at West Point, so yeah, there were a lot more women. There's just a whole different kind of—how should I say—when you start introducing women in the military, and I'm not saying it's bad. Not saying it's bad. There's a lot of things that go on, lot of things that go on.
- 02-00:49:37
Lage: You mean relationships between people.
- 02-00:49:38
Thomas: Absolutely. You got men, you got women. You've got a lot of young people. I mean, a lot of these kids are eighteen years old. A lot of your officers are twenty-one, twenty-two years old. They're kids. I mean, they're just really getting their feet on the ground, and they've got all these hormones, they've got all this stuff going on.
- 02-00:49:58
Lage: It's like a college campus.
- 02-00:50:01
Thomas: Yeah, it really is, and there's all this about relationships between officers and enlisted, and it's difficult. It's a difficult thing to manage, and the bottom line is that careers can be ruined before they ever get started.
- 02-00:50:24
Lage: So it's another kind of difficult—
- 02-00:50:26
Thomas: Yeah, it really is. But there's certainly—I mean, it's demeaning to say there's a place in the military for women because that's not the way it is. Women should be—women are in the military, they're there to stay, they do outstanding job, and they can do the jobs. There's no reason for anyone to think any less of them.
- 02-00:50:55
Lage: But it still complicates the social setting, is that what you're getting at?
- 02-00:50:59
Thomas: Absolutely.

02-00:51:00

Lage: But maybe makes it more interesting!

02-00:51:02

Thomas: It does make—and again, the military's always been looked at as this whole male dominated society, and did it need to be softened up a little bit? Maybe. I mean, again, it's a cross-section of society, and in my opinion—I'm sure I would probably ruffle some feathers, but if we ever had to go to a draft, I think women should be required. If we're going to make everything equal, then when it comes to draft notices the women got to get them, too.

02-00:51:35

Lage: Well, that might happen next time around.

02-00:51:38

Thomas: You know what? I don't see any way where they could avoid it. I really don't. Again, if you're going to reap the benefits, you got to expose yourself to some of the bad parts of it, too. But again, I think most people who serve in the military—most of the negative comments that I hear about even gays, women, back in the day blacks and other minorities in the military didn't come from the people in the military! It comes from civilians trying to impose what they believe on the military as a society, and they have no idea what the military is like as a society, because if they did they would understand that what they're saying has no basis, because the military has a way of working around it. Well, not working around it. The military has a way of absorbing whatever it is and making it work, in the sense that we're not making it work necessarily even because we have to, but it's the right thing to do.

02-00:52:51

Lage: That's a good place to end, I think, very good!

[End of Interview]