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Oral History Center  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Edward Waldrop: Port Chicago Oral History Project

Interviews conducted and donated by  
Robert Allen  
in 1977

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Edward Waldrop, Edward Waldrop: Port Chicago Oral History Project”  
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**Edward Waldrop** recalls his memories of Port Chicago before and after the explosion. He suggests that prejudicial standards left potential for sabotage, questionable behavior, and complications with the mutiny charges and trial following the Port Chicago explosion. He outlines his experience as an ammunition loader, his different base assignments, and the difficulties black soldiers faced in the service. Waldrop also details his experience after the explosion, his relocation to Camp Shoemaker, the subsequent trial and his time at FCI Terminal Island. He also offers updates on some fellow servicemen with whom he kept in contact.

Interview 1: December 9, 1977

Allen: Interview with Edward Waldrop, December 9, 1977.

Waldrop: At that time the Navy was prejudiced, it's still prejudiced. You know that. The thing about it is we didn't refuse to work. What we did say, we wouldn't work on that base.

Allen: On that base? Or on the ammunition loading?

Waldrop: No, we wouldn't work on that base.

Allen: Why was that?

Waldrop: Well the set up was like a {machine?}. You had nothing on land on this base but negroes, except the carpenters.

Allen: They were white carpenters, right?

Waldrop: Yeah, officers. The rest of us were black. Usually you had quite [interruption]. So you could see whites coming in and off that base anyway they wanted to, but the blacks, you had to show your identification and all that. But you can't prove no sabotage. You couldn't prove it. But when we got before the guy that prosecuted us, see he called us in one at a time. I don't know what he said to the rest of them, but when I tried to tell him what I had seen about a week before this explosion, he told me—[interruption].

Allen: Let's start over on that.

Waldrop: What I was saying—the prosecutors, see he's the one to take my statement, so he don't tell us he gonna prosecute us. At least he don't tell me. He calls me in and sits down and talks all about my boot training, all about everything. So then he asked me to—he didn't know how he was going to plead the case, did you refuse to work. So I said, "No we did not refuse to work, but we couldn't work on this base because, I said, for a week now it's been a black car. The whites can come in on that base and ride all through the ammunition dump.

Allen: And they didn't check the I.D.—?

Waldrop: I said nobody checked. So, I say, whether it be sabotage I couldn't say it, 'cause I couldn't say it in a court of law. So he said you can't use that. {inaudible} So now he's talking as though he's my lawyer. When we gets back to where we're staying, I think it's Shoemaker {inaudible}

each time he would call us each one of us in and ask us these questions all over again. But every time we bring up about these cars—.

Allen: Cars? To come in on the base.

Waldrop: Coming in on the base. This would be squashed. He'd say, can't use that. Yet, whites could come in on base on Sunday, on the weekends. Coloreds couldn't come in there, see. You had colored guards at the gate. White wouldn't stand guards so the coloreds stood guard. White people just walk in there, I guess. You had a lot of southern boys in there. They wouldn't question a white man too much. And specially officers, there wasn't no questioning them. And I tell you what, we got off the ship. We had just finished {inaudible}. We had just finished our shift, in other words the explosion happened about ten o'clock that night, I think it was.

Allen: Yes, close to 10:30.

Waldrop: {inaudible} So we had the twelve to eight shift. When we come from work that morning, from the dock that morning, we see a car come in there, a black coupe. At that time, they made them old coupe cars. Black with no mark or nothing. So that's why everybody, the whole ship, I think I was with the third section—no second section. Section two.

Allen: Second Division. Second Division?

Waldrop: Right. So the whole division seen this, see. But, after they threatened us, told us {inaudible}, they brought some admiral, I don't know who this guy was but they brought him in there. He said, "Well, I hope they take every one of you and kill you.

Allen: That's what he said to all the men when they were assembled?

Waldrop: Mm-hmm. Well, see at that time we had left and went back over there. What's this little place across from Mare Island? What's this little place—?

Allen: Vallejo?

Waldrop: I believe it is Vallejo. It's sitting right by that little town there. {inaudible} And we was down on this little flat down there, where the navy had a part of it. See on the other side of Mare Island. We was down, but we're further down on the base than the island.

Allen: You were down there on what they call the {Rider St. Barracks?}.

- Waldrop: Well, see after the come up there and they couldn't talk us out of that, so it was a hundred and something of us, in other words the whole division. On the first floor, 'cause we were on the first. And after they couldn't run us out of that, so that's when they moved us over to—. They brought in this admiral. So we tried to explain it to him. They got it down to around sixty men. Sixty. All but sixty wouldn't go back to work. So then they moved us out in the barge, put us out in the water. We stayed out there for a while, all jammed up. So we still wouldn't go. [interruption] We still wouldn't go. So then they moved us from there to Shoemaker. Now we never refused to work. They even brought Lieutenant [James] Tobin in, they brought the other Lieutenant—can't think of his name, something like Shaw.
- Allen: [Ernest] Delucchi?
- Waldrop: I believe that was his name. Lieutenant Delucchi, Tobin, and another guy. Each one come in there, ask us individually would we work? We said, "Yes, we would work. But not on that base."
- Allen: Not on that base, yeah.
- Waldrop: We would work anywhere expect that base there. [interruption – Waldrop introduces his wife to Allen] So when he come in there and speak to each one of us individually, "would we work." We never refused that. He asked us would we go overseas. We said yes. [interruption] Would we go over to Mare Island and load ammunition. We told him yes. Another place that had an ammunition dump. Would we go there? We told 'em yes. Would we go to Norfolk? Told 'em yeah. But we wouldn't go back down to Port Chicago. And every time the reason come up and we give it to him, what we had seen on that base, that would be squashed. They'd debate that answer. When we left there for Shoemaker, that's when I seen this commander who I was telling you about who was prosecuting—.
- Allen: [James] Coakley? Was that his name?
- Waldrop: {inaudible} Not sure. He was kind of greyish-looking man.
- Allen: He was an older guy?
- Waldrop: Yes. He might be dead by now. Well, anyway. See, now he never did explain it to us. He never did say well, "I'm the prosecutor." He never did tell us that. At least he never did tell me, 'cause every time we went over to be interviewed, we went separately. So, what we could do, is try to compare notes with each other. Like when I come back I said,

“Man, what kind of questions did he want from you?” Then you tell me.

Allen: Did he try to get you to turn against the others, or anything like that?

Waldrop: A couple, yeah. See what they want to do, see [Joe] Small was supposed to be the ring leader. What they wanted to do they wanted to hand the numbers on Small. Small, [Cy] Sheppard—.

Allen: Sheppard was considered a leader?

Waldrop: Yeah. Now see these guys had a little education. Small had a pretty good education. Sheppard had a pretty good education. Boy from Tennessee, I think McGee, he had a pretty good education. Boy from Detroit. All these guys had a pretty good education. They had finished around twelfth grade. Some of ‘em even put in a year in college. A couple of them had been around working on construction jobs. They know about strikes and things like that, see. He had all that junk before him. So that’s what they was trying to do, was pin it. There was, let me see, six or seven, eight of us, I think ten of us got eight years. The rest of them guys see was old. {inaudible} Like at that time I was eighteen about nineteen. So he said, “You was born in South Carolina?” I said, “No I wasn’t born there. I put that down, but I was raised in South Carolina. I was born in {Philadelphia?}.” He said, “You went to school in South Carolina?” I said, “Yeah, I went to school in South Carolina.” He said, “Well these guys here they don’t mean you no good—.”

Allen: He said what?

Waldrop: They don’t mean you no good.

Allen: The other guys?

Waldrop: You know, them guys they’ve been working on jobs all their lives. That’s all they know how to do, work on a job and that kind of stuff. He said, “Why don’t you go on back and take a summary court martial. {inaudible} He say, “And that way you won’t have had no bad discharge when you get out.” I say, “Well look, why can’t you just do this here? Why can’t you just send me overseas then if you’re gonna give me a summary court martial why can’t you just send me overseas then if you’re going to give me a summary court martial? Why can’t you send me overseas instead of sending me back to Port Chicago? Why do you want me to go back to Port Chicago first, and then leave, get a transfer? ‘Cause once I get back over there you’re gonna do me just like y’all did me before, I tried to ask for a transfer before, and

you wouldn't give it to me." Every time I would bring up about this car we had seen and how these people could come on that base whenever they wanted to, right away he would evade that.

- Allen: Were these civilians in this car? These are whites?
- Waldrop: These are whites.
- Allen: But they were not military, were they civilians or what, could you tell?
- Waldrop: Once we seen a civilian come in there, but he made like he was inspecting. Well see, we had ammunition dumps, too, you know. You brought ammunition in on the train and then you had ammunition dumps, too. He come in there, was one or two come in there, they make like they had to inspect the ammunition dumps. See how low the ammunition was so they could fill them back up. But most of our ammunition come in there by train. We unloaded it straight from the car.
- Allen: And the cars you saw, that black coupe, that was on the day of the explosion?
- Waldrop: We seen that that morning. See, we got off at eight o'clock that morning. We worked from twelve to eight.
- Allen: What did it do? It came up to the pier or what?
- Waldrop: No, it came down. See, there was a road {inaudible—shows Allen a visual} See this is the main highway coming from Pittsburg. Here's the barracks. Here's the pier here coming back around like that. Now here's the ammunition dumps all back up in here. These here are ammunition dumps, other words where you store ammunition all back in here. Now this road comes through here—here's an ammunition dump. Now he comes down here to the pier, almost to the pier, before you get to the pier he turns and goes back like he gonna inspect the ammunition dump. Well after I explained it to him and I told him I said, "Well you ain't gonna send me back. If you're gonna give me not a general court martial but a smaller court martial," I said, "Why don't you just let me go overseas to some other place."
- Allen: There was the general court martial and the summary. And he was saying he could give you the summary which is the lighter one. What did he want you to do though? Did he want something from you in order to—?

- Waldrop: Yeah, he wanted me to say Small. I'm trying to think of who it was. I know Small—.
- Allen: He wanted you to say Small—.
- Waldrop: Was the leader.
- Allen: He wanted you to say Small was the leader. What does that mean? How did he want you to do that?
- Waldrop: Well, after I refused, well he didn't go in all the detail.
- Allen: Well, what did he do? He asked you, "Was Small the leader?" or what?
- Waldrop: So I told him no. I said nobody making me do nothing. He said well somebody got to be the leader. He said everybody need the leader. He said even him, he need a leader. I said we don't need a leader if you know what's going on on the base. Don't nobody need no leader there. So that's why I say that we never did refuse to work. We never did. Even when they threatened us with killing all of us. We never did refuse. But we did refuse to go back on that base—.
- Allen: At Port Chicago.
- Waldrop: Because every time we brought up this conversation about these cars that we seen on that base, they would squash it. They wouldn't bring it up no more. Only time a car was mentioned, either peoples on that base, we'd have to, I'd have to bring it up myself. He wouldn't bring that up.
- Allen: You say every time you brought that up and it was squashed, this was during their questioning you about—?
- Waldrop: For the trial.
- Allen: Was there any other reasons why you wouldn't want to work at Port Chicago? {inaudible} You came there, when did you come to Port Chicago?
- Waldrop: Last of '44 I think.
- Allen: It was in '44, in other words you were there just a few months before the explosion there, or—?
- Waldrop: I was there about six, seven months.

- Allen: Before that you had been at Great Lakes?
- Waldrop: Mare Island. I left Great Lakes, went to Mare Island. I left Mare Island went over there. See another thing, the reason I didn't like it, you couldn't get no rating. Guys had been there three to four years and they still couldn't get no rating. There were guys doing carpentry work—you know blacks doing carpentry work—with whites stand up over them wearing second class and third class, telling the blacks what to do. The blacks running the crane, they couldn't get no rating. The ones loading, they can't get no rating. We had no forms to take no test or none of that kind of stuff. So I didn't like Port Chicago. And then after all this {inaudible}. The whites could just walk in on your bases. Well, you know at that time they had taught us to check everybody out who come on your base. You were even supposed to check the admiral out if he come on there. Even if he come on there every day, you're supposed to check him out. And I've come in there plenty of times at night, you know come off my leave, at night, whites pull up in the car do like that. Hell, some of them I didn't know who they was, was in the car. I admit that. I even {inaudible}.
- Allen: They just kind of wave their hand.
- Waldrop: {inaudible} But when we come in the base, we have to show all kinds of identification. ID card, pass, so I just didn't like it, period.
- Allen: What about transfers? You couldn't get ratings, but what about transfers?
- Waldrop: Couldn't get 'em. How you're gonna get a transfer, man? Hell, that's worse than trying to get a rating. You might as well get a rating, if you stay there four, five, six years, but you wasn't gonna get no transfer. Not there. See 'cause they didn't have nothing but the blacks. Let me see there was about five divisions. About nine barracks, top and bottom.
- Allen: So almost 1,000 men. What was the conditions like on the base itself, the physical conditions, the living conditions, the recreation itself—what was that like?
- Waldrop: Well, the recreation, that wasn't too bad. You didn't have all that good of materials but that wasn't the bad part. The food it wasn't up to par, but service food don't be up to par no way. If you understand the service. Liberty—that was set up shabby, but under war time you couldn't expect no better. I think you got something like forty-two hours every two weeks.

Allen: Where did you go on your liberty when you had a couple of days? Any places around you could go?

Waldrop: Frisco. Oakland.

Allen: Frisco, Oakland. Seventh Street in Oakland? What about in Pittsburg? Was there anything in Pittsburg?

Waldrop: Not that much there. Soldiers were there. Hell, every time you go there you have to fight. See, it was a soldier's town, Pittsburg was. Because there's a big army camp there, and one right out of Shoemaker too, big army camp. You had to fight your way out from there. Best place if you want to be safe, if a sailor want to be safe, you have to go to Oakland or Frisco.

Allen: What about the relations between the officers and the men on the base, how did people get along, was there problems or what was that like?

Waldrop: Well, I guess when you live with a bunch of men you gonna always have some problems. Specially when you've got a bunch of black with just whites over you. See we had no colored officers there. I doubt, we might have had, I don't believe that we did. We didn't have but fifteen to twenty third class. We didn't even have a chief petty officer appear. Not a black chief petty officer. If it was, I never did see him. Not even machine, not even crane operators. Only thing we had, I think we had one or two chef cooks. Even {inaudible}.

[interruption]

Waldrop: If you had any kind of common sense at all, you know, people just don't walk in and out – that's your house. A base is a house, that's a house to you, or a ship. Don't any everybody just walk in and out. Especially if you've got damn near enough ammunition there to blow half New York City away. We had enough ammunition there to blow New York City away.

Allen: Did anybody complain about the lack of security or try to do anything about it?

Waldrop: Who you're going to complain to? All the dirty work, the blacks had to do that. Like giving you hell, punishing you.

Allen: That was done by blacks?

Waldrop: That had to handed out by black. Only thing whites did was give you bread and water for five days or so many hours, two or three days over here—.

Allen: And the guards at the gate were black?

Waldrop: Yeah.

Allen: They had some white Marine guards around there too, didn't they? What did they do?

Waldrop: I never seen them.

Allen: You never saw them. 'Cause they called some to testify at the trial, some white marine guards. I wasn't sure what they—.

Waldrop: Look, they used them guys for a front. See that's why I say, that thing is a hot potato, because I know it and damn near all fifty of us know it, that base was sabotaged. They know it. The government know it. The Navy know it. But the Navy can't let that get out. It would still look bad on them. Just like they went over there and messed up in Vietnam. You think they're gonna tell—they can't help from telling the people about it now. But do you think they want that to get out, that they made a mistake over there in Vietnam? So when we said "sabotage," hell do you think they were gonna let us, a bunch of blacks, come talking about sabotage? {inaudible} That would look bad. It was looking bad enough because we said we wasn't going to work on that base no more. That looked bad.

Allen: What was it like, the actual loading of ammunition? Could you describe that a little bit? When you worked down on the pier, what did you do?

Waldrop: Stevedore. {inaudible} Well say, for instance, two ships come in at twelve o'clock today. If we come in at twelve o'clock today, we go down there. One shift go in at four o'clock that evening, next shift would go in at twelve, the next shift would come back in at eight. We load them two ships within about a day and a half, two days.

Allen: That fast?

Waldrop: Yeah, we're loading.

Allen: What was the pace of the work like? Was it very fast, or you worked at your own pace, or how did they have it set up?

- Waldrop: Well, you produce so much at night. Every eight hours, produced so much.
- Allen: They expect you to produce—?
- Waldrop: Produce so much in eight hours. Say you might have a car come in there with fifteen hundred 500-pound bombs. We might get three of them with just that. Then you might get one car with nothing but 500-pound bombs. {inaudible} Then you would get one car come in there with the regular ammunition for guns on planes, get the regular ammunition set up. So you're unloading maybe three a night, maybe four. The average ship carry about five, maybe seven, eight cars of ammunition.
- Allen: What would happen if you didn't load as much as they thought you should load?
- Waldrop: Somebody would catch H-E-L-L.
- Allen: Ever had that happen in your division?
- Waldrop: Oh yeah, quite a few times. You know guys get stubborn. Maybe the chow wasn't what we wanted. People would slow down. You couldn't strike, couldn't quit, but you just slowed down.
- Allen: You could slow down. And then there was instances when the men did that—protest about the chow or something?
- Waldrop: Yeah. About your liberty. Say for instance ship would come in there, maybe have two ships in there at one time, couldn't get but two in there. But you might have two sitting out there in the bay, maybe three out there waiting. They might cut your liberty. Say your liberty coming up next week. But there are five ships—two at the docks, three setting out there in the bay. So they cut your liberty.
- Allen: So the men would then slow down—.
- Waldrop: We'd squawk or maybe slow down on the work or either sometime you go in there and some of the guys get sloppy with the food, half mix it. Guys get mad about that. You take— we had ole damn, trying to think of this guy's name, he was the stove, the whatchamacallit, was the supply officer. He might would tell the guys to cut down on the food. Say wasting food. Well, you've got a man doing eight hours of work, handling five to 600 pounds, I don't think he can waste too much food when he come in after four hours, in other words he work

four hours come in and eat and go back and work more hours. He ain't gonna waste too much food after he put in four hours of steady going. You didn't mess around too much.

Allen: Did you ever hear that the officers try to get the different sections to compete against each other or race against each other?

Waldrop: Yeah, they did. {inaudible} Take them out to other camps, recreation to other camps.

Allen: That was the award for working the fastest?

Waldrop: Yes.

Allen: Did you ever hear anything about the officers betting amongst themselves?

Waldrop: No. I don't know too much about that. {inaudible} I heard the Lieutenant Tobin was {inaudible}. This other guy, he was the section leader.

Allen: Was it another white guy?

Waldrop: White.

Allen: White guy, okay.

Waldrop: See, Lieutenant Tobin, he was the leader. Then you had this other Lieutenant I was telling you about, he was the section leader. Then you had a JG [junior grade], he was sort of like Lieutenant Tobin. He was over everything of our section, he was over the whole section. This other Lieutenant he was—most of his job was to check the ammunition going in the hold, see that it was put in there right. Then you had the other one. {inaudible} Lieutenant Tobin I think was JG, but I'm not sure.

Allen: But you heard him and the other guy talking?

Waldrop: Like our section come in. In other words come in around eight o'clock. This week we're from twelve to eight. Next week we work from eight to four. The next week we work from four to twelve. In other words, swing shift. Never did work, it was always a swing shift. I heard them tell other guy, "How many did you unload?" "We did such and such a thing."

Allen: He'd ask how much you unloaded?

- Waldrop: Yeah, how much tonnage. You say “we did such and such a thing.” “Damn, I didn’t do quite that good.” He say, “I know, I saw the report.” You know something like that. But as far as betting, I didn’t see that.
- Allen: They were conscious about it—tonnage. They were concerned about it.
- Waldrop: Mm-hmm. How much tonnage.
- Allen: Well, before the explosion since the men did have grievances about the conditions there did anybody ever try to do anything about it, like I don’t know what you could have done but was there any means or any kind of protest other than just slowing down the work?
- Waldrop: No. See that was another thing they couldn’t put against us, because, other words like ratings, well the men just squawk about the ratings, go before the captain, we’d sign a petition, but like holding meetings, where you’re trying to do something against them, they couldn’t bring that into court. They didn’t have it. See, they asked us all them kind of questions. Did we ever hold a meeting?
- Allen: What was this petition you mentioned? {inaudible}
- Waldrop: Yeah, well you know, we turned it in to the section leader. We had section, we had a couple. We had four section leaders, two upstairs, two downstairs, colored folks. They were second class. We turn it into them.
- Allen: This is before the explosion? What did they say? I mean in the petition—.
- Waldrop: Telling them we want ratings. We’d like to have some papers to take examination to get ratings. Say for instance you might want a transfer. You had to turn it into your section leader. Couldn’t carry it over there and give it to the commanding officer. Couldn’t give it to Lieutenant Tobin. He’d tell you don’t see me, see your section leader.
- Allen: What happened?
- Waldrop: Get lost in the shuffle. I don’t know how the cards would fall after we would leave out of there. So what I say. I’d still say they never could claim, but they had to put mutiny on us, the government had to. They couldn’t let it stand no other way. I could understand it.
- Allen: How come—?

Waldrop: 'Cause it would look bad in the eyesight of the Navy man. We had bucked the biggest outfit, biggest branch of the services there is in the world. Here you got fifty black men bucked the biggest, richest branch of the service that there is. That go for Russia, France, and Britain. Britain had one of the best navies there's supposed to be. Hell, but we still had the money. Navy still got that money to get what they want. You've got fifty black people out there gonna buck them. Nah, man. You know you can't. I can understand it.

Allen: Where were you when the explosion occurred?

Waldrop: In the barracks. I think some of the guys were getting up, fixing to wash up so they could get ready for work. I believe some of them were. But we were working from twelve to eight that night. That explosion, {inaudible} you said 10:30?

Allen: Yeah, almost 10:30.

Waldrop: If they waited another damn two hours, boy, they'd got us. 'Cause we sure had to go at twelve that night. 'Cause we just had come off the ship that got blowed up. We'd just come off of that. We went on from twelve to eight. So that'd meant we'd of got blowed up if they waited two more hours.

Allen: What was it like? You were in the barracks.

Waldrop: Shit, I ain't heard nothing like it.

Allen: Did you see it? No, you didn't see it because you were inside.

Waldrop: Yep. Lit the whole place, like it was daylight out there, just like it is out there now.

Allen: What happened after?

Waldrop: Yeah, 'cause they had two ships in there. Them ships was almost loaded. Then you had about five, I imagine you had about five to six cars with ammunition in there. Hell, you figure out, boy, that's a whole lot of ammunition right there.

Allen: After the explosion, immediately after the explosion, what did you do? What did the men in the barracks do?

Waldrop: Well they got us together, the ones that wasn't wounded.

Allen: Who got you together there?

- Waldrop: The section leader.
- Allen: The section leader. The black section leader. Where was Tobin, was he around then?
- Waldrop: Yeah, they come over and check up on us. Had us all for roll call, find out what was what. But then we went to this place I was telling you about—.
- Allen: Shoemaker.
- Waldrop: Went to Shoemaker.
- Allen: So, you went out that night to Shoemaker?
- Waldrop: The most of us. Specially the guys who beds and things was all mangled and tore up. See, most of the guys on the top bunk, see they the ones that got hurt. I was in the bottom bunk. But up over me, he got mangled up pretty bad. That's why I was asking you was you going down there to see him. Boy named Gill, can't think of his—he was a young boy. He ought to be living. I think he's around somewhere Aiken, South Carolina. He's in South Carolina but it's around Aiken. He got mangled up pretty bad. That's why, now they're going to ask the man whose damn arm is all cut up, now they gets him and brings him out of the hospital and put him with us and ask him is he going to work back there anymore. Now hell, I don't think that was even fair. You're gonna ask a man who's all—.
- Allen: This is the guy in the bunk above you?
- Waldrop: Mm-hmm.
- Allen: Do you remember his name?
- Waldrop: Gill.
- Allen: That's his last name?
- Waldrop: Yeah, you never know too many guy's first name in the service, 'cause everybody goes by your last name. I mean your name, you never did use your given name, you use your name.
- Allen: Do you remember Green, Ollie Green?
- Waldrop: Yeah.

- Allen: He's from Washington, he was an older guy.
- Waldrop: Yeah, I used to see Ollie Green before they closed Fifth Street Market. I used to see him quite a lot. But after they closed the market and he lost his wife, I don't know whether he ever got over that or not.
- Allen: How long ago was that?
- Waldrop: This was about ten, fifteen years since I—.
- Allen: Last time you saw him.
- Waldrop: Yeah.
- Allen: Yeah, because I tried to find him too and I couldn't find him.
- Waldrop: No. He might be dead 'cause he lost his wife and they closed that market up. He lost his stand in there.
- Allen: He had a stand in the market place?
- Waldrop: Yes. He was no baby himself at that time.
- Allen: Yeah, he was in his thirties.
- Waldrop: Late thirties. I imagine if he's living he's about seventy-nine. That wasn't yesterday.
- Allen: So, they took you up to Shoemaker?
- Waldrop: Just to Shoemaker. We stayed there for only two weeks.
- Allen: Then you went down to—?
- Waldrop: This place over there, below Vallejo.
- Allen: Close to Mare Island.
- Waldrop: That's when all that—shit jumped out of the fire. That's where it started, right there.
- Allen: Had the men discussed amongst themselves or anything about how they felt about this or what they were going to do?
- Waldrop: Nope.

- Allen: There was a lot of bad feelings from Port Chicago.
- Waldrop: Yeah. Well see, what we thought was now we get transferred. At least get away from that base, get transferred. That was out though. But they don't even build a damn pier back before they come and want to know whether we'll come back to work. See, the cat was getting out of the bag about that car, the cars come in. That was the main thing. See, that was getting out of the bag. Once it started getting out of the bag, well they had to cut it off.
- Allen: Who else was talking about that car?
- Waldrop: There was a bunch of 'em, seen it. Seen 'em come in there. Bunch of guys. We used to always sit up in the barracks and talk about how the whites could ride around on our base and use cameras and we didn't think it was right, and we couldn't even have a camera on the base. Couldn't even have one in your barracks, let alone have one on the damn base. At that time, you weren't allowed to have a camera in your barracks. Hell, two to three guys brought cameras in there and they'd take them at the gate—coloreds. So, they had a squawk about that once or twice. Whites could bring their cameras on there. And we couldn't bring cameras. A boy went over there and bought a camera, was a big camera back in them days, remember the kind that you used to pull out—.
- Allen: Like an accordion.
- Waldrop: Yeah. He got one of 'em and bought in second-hand shop, paid one-hundred dollars and some dollars for it and they confiscated it at the gate. They had a big stink about it. So they squashed it. They had a squawk about that. Certain watches you couldn't wear.
- Allen: After the trouble developed and the 200 or whatever, 250 men whatever, the first you said that weren't going to go back there to Port Chicago—do you remember anything about a list being circulated then amongst the men, being asked to sign it? Amongst the men.
- Waldrop: Yeah, but I don't know what that list was about. I really don't.
- Allen: You didn't see it or sign it yourself?
- Waldrop: I don't know whether I signed it—it's been so long. The thing started getting confused and getting out of hand.
- Allen: Getting out of hand, what do you mean?

- Waldrop: In other words, they was—you know they started treating us like a bunch of cattle after they found out we wasn't going back thataway. It was just confusion. Piled up on a barge. I say barge was big enough for seventy-five, eighty men to be comfortable on. Hell, they put one-hundred and some of us on.
- Allen: Was there any fights between the guards and the men, or amongst the men or whatever?
- Waldrop: I think once or twice, they kind of had a couple of scrapples there. But that was before we were put under, in other words we were sort of like under house guard then. I think they had a few scrapples, fights. Anytime you take any large institution, any large facility, and you've got the upper hands on them, somebody in there is gonna try to take advantage of it, and they're gonna push a little too damn far where you can't—somebody in that crowd ain't gonna take it. If somebody on the outside is gonna push, then somebody in the crowd ain't gonna take that push. See all of 'em ain't gonna take it. There's going to be some, but it's going to be few in there ain't gonna stand it. I think a couple of fights broke out. In the chow, in chow it started. They wasn't going to feed us. So we had to organize, get the men to organize. But see that's when the weight fell on Small and a bunch of them guys, see, then they started organizing. In other words, so many cook. They picked out the cook. So many of us had to serve. So many of us had to clean the kitchen up. See, the help on the base said they wasn't gonna do it, so we had to start doing it for ourselves.
- Allen: That was on the barge or you ate meals somewhere else?
- Waldrop: We ate meals on the base, but we had to sleep on the barge.
- Allen: So you'd march off, fix your own food. The help on the base was that colored or white?
- Waldrop: Mixed. That's where this leadership, Small picked up. That's why they picked Small. 'Cause Small wasn't the only one in the group that did this though, see. We was all together. But then when it comes to breaking down, some of the guys who had helped organize how we would work, they went back to work. Well then, when we got to Shoemaker, they conned a lot of them and they taken a lighter court martial. So that pushed that many more. So, I don't whether any of 'em turned against Small, put him, in or say something against him or what, but anyways that throwed the weight on him then, see. 'Cause it was only him, Sheppard, Banks, a few of the guys who knowed how to organize us.

- Allen: What about {Liley?} and [Willy] Gay, were they leaders?
- Waldrop: I don't think so.
- Allen: Small wasn't actually a petty officer?
- Waldrop: No, see, them guys kind of know how to organize people, how to get them together. How to keep them from getting into trouble. In other words, what we was doing, we was avoiding trouble. See, in other words, we was setting up a system where they couldn't say, heck they don't want us to do nothing. We had that kind of system set up. So anything that they wanted done, we did it. In other words like say when we cleaned up the kitchen, they told us we'd have to clean up the kitchen. He'd organize and got a group together and cleaned up the kitchen when we got through. Cleaned up around the barracks. We had it set up where anything that they asked us to do they couldn't go back and say, "Well, they won't do it." Only thing they could say is, they're not going back there, not to that base. Anywhere else they'll go. I had my things. I burned 'em up about fifteen years ago. I burned 'em up.
- Allen: What's this you burned up?
- Waldrop: The transcripts. I burned 'em up. I got tired of it laying around the closet. So I just burned it. But you could look through them, and all through that, he asked the same damn question over and over. And the guy who's defending us, he didn't have no defense. Everything he ask us or want to ask us, he couldn't ask because it was rejected. It was abstained. So the damn defense lawyers, he got all this material there, everything we done said and he only using what he wants to use. He ain't using what, like if I go hire a lawyer and the lawyer come in there and demand for you, you can just return that lawyer, my lawyer demand a certain transcription used. They couldn't do that. We didn't even know who our lawyer was gonna be until we were sitting up in court.
- Allen: So, you didn't have a meeting with you lawyer before—?
- Waldrop: Not our lawyer. With the defense lawyer with him.
- Allen: That's what I mean, the Navy defense lawyer.
- Waldrop: Yeah, for the Navy.
- Allen: You met with him before?

- Waldrop: Yeah. Every other day he had us in his office, asking the same old questions over and over. But the only thing about it he never did tell us that he was gonna prosecute us or either he never did say he was the prosecutor.
- Allen: Oh, but that was the prosecutor. That's the guy who called you in and questioned you, who took down these statements.
- Waldrop: But our lawyer, never did—.
- Allen: The Navy defense lawyer, not the prosecutor, you never met with him?
- Waldrop: Never met him. Never did see him, till we come in court. Didn't know who that was going to be. Sent these three little young dudes in there.
- Allen: What did you all do? Did you work out some understanding amongst yourself as to what you'd say, or how did you handle that?
- Waldrop: It wasn't anything you could say except what I'm telling you. It's nothing else, you can tell 'em. Just like I'm telling you: "I'm not going back there. I'll go anywhere but I'm not going back over in there." And you jump up and you say what's your reason. And I jump up and tell you my reason, then you squash it. Say we better not use that. But you leading me to believe you're my lawyer if you tell me you can't use that. That's what I'm thinking. But when I get to court, setting up there, he the damn the thing gonna prosecute. He's the one got my head on a silver platter. [inaudible] I don't even think they let him come until after the trial got started. I think the traffic got started and they seeing how the trial work or not. Then they let him in.
- Allen: Did you have any meetings with him?
- Waldrop: Nope.
- Allen: What happened to that meeting on the barge where Small spoke, where he called the men together and talked to them, what was that about?
- Waldrop: He was trying to give the men the facts.
- Allen: He was trying to what?
- Waldrop: He was trying to do was give the men the facts. In other words, you had no security on that base. All the security. Now you take on Mare Island, you couldn't go on Mare Island. No way in hell you can get on that island. Couldn't go on Treasure Island. Nobody could go on there without a pass or something. You couldn't go on there with a camera.

They meant cameras for nobody. But all this here stuff we've seen it at Port Chicago, where whites could come in there with a camera. Whites can come in there with their wives at night, anytime. Blacks couldn't do it though. Small, all he was doing was telling them the truth. He wasn't trying to start nothing, stir up nothing.

Allen: So, he call the men together on the barge—.

Waldrop: And tried to talk to them.

Allen: To do what?

Waldrop: So, he told them if we stick together, we can get transferred—get out of this mess. Get on to some kind of decent base. That's what we wanted.

Allen: That's what you thought at the time, was that if everybody stuck together, they couldn't what—?

Waldrop: Hell, they couldn't kill all of us. They couldn't jump up kill four or five, maybe 1000 men. [inaudible] The United States would look bad. If it hadn't been so many they might have would have killed us. Hell, it was too many. I guess they say we won't let the world know we're that bad. [laughs] Yeah man, they threatened us. They tell us, they had one old admiral there, that son of gun called us everything but a nigger. He almost called us that.

Allen: What? The admiral. Did you have any expectation that this mutiny charge was going to come up before it actually did? Before you were charged with mutiny, did anyone think it was going to happen?

Waldrop: You mean after the base blew up? No.

Allen: The men said, "We don't want to go back to that base."

Waldrop: What we though, that they would break us up and transfer us. Send us to the other ammunition dumps or either send us other anywhere. That thought never crossed our minds. No, 'cause I mean we was all together practically all during that time. Those months, we was all together. Night and day.

Allen: When did you find out that they were charging you with mutiny?

Waldrop: When we went back to this little island. This little base down in there down from—.

- Allen: Down at Mare Island.
- Waldrop: Mare Island. That base down below Mare Island there.
- Allen: So this is—?
- Waldrop: This is about a month.
- Allen: Were you on the barge?
- Waldrop: Yes.
- Allen: Who told you? How did you find out?
- Waldrop: We didn't exactly know then. We found out—well, see, what had come up, what they wanted us to settle for was a lesser court martial and go back to work. But it wasn't on our conditions—it was on their terms. Otherwise we'd have to go back to Port Chicago. And then if the officers wanted us to go, then we'd be transferred. So other words we really didn't know we was going to be charged with mutiny until when we went to stockade back in Shoemaker. We really didn't know then. We really knowed they were going to charge us with mutiny when they found out they couldn't get us fifty to go back to work. That's when the old man come out and told us that we are going to charge you all with mutiny.
- Allen: Who told you?
- Waldrop: Some admiral.
- Allen: It was an admiral? So then you went to trial, the defense was handled by the Navy lieutenants, whoever they were. Thurgood Marshall shows up but you don't meet with him.
- Waldrop: Nope.
- Allen: Did you have any transaction with anybody from the NAACP at any time?
- Waldrop: No. He was there, he was there every day. But afterwards, I think it was about a week. 'Cause I don't think they would let him come there at first. See, at first I think they was gonna bar him. But what they did, see they slipped up and let the newspaper, let this woman reporter get in there, and that leaked out.
- Allen: She got in where?

- Waldrop: Into Treasure Island, where they held the court. I tell you what you do when you go back, go up to Frisco I think she works for the Frisco Tribune or something, she worked. But anyway she works for a newspaper.
- Allen: Was it a white woman reporter?
- Waldrop: Yeah.
- Allen: Okay. She came to Treasure Island where—.
- Waldrop: The trial was held. And her and a few reporters was allowed in there and that got out, and that's how Thurgood Marshall, I think got in there.
- Allen: Did he come with her or have a connection to her?
- Waldrop: See, I guess by him being a lawyer and knowing law, I guess he used his law and his influence, got in there. They had to let him in there after they let the newspaper reporters in there.
- Allen: Did you have any contact with the woman reporter during or after the trial?
- Waldrop: No sir. No. We wasn't allowed to talk to nobody.
- Allen: She wasn't allowed to talk to anybody.
- Waldrop: {inaudible} Wasn't allowed to talk to nobody before, wasn't allowed to talk to nobody after.
- Allen: What happened afterwards?
- Waldrop: After the trial, we was transferred down, we stayed on Treasure Island, stayed there for about a week. We transferred to San Diego.
- Allen: San Pedro.
- Waldrop: I mean San Pedro.
- Allen: The trial was on Treasure Island, and that's where you stayed during the trial.
- Waldrop: Yeah. So we stayed there. We stayed there more than that. We stayed there until the conviction come in.

- Allen: Yeah that came later; your sentences came later.
- Waldrop: Yeah. And then we didn't even go to court. They come in there. I believe we even got that down in handwriting or something like that. Nah, they give us that, a handwritten statement and they called us up. We didn't even go down there. This Marine, I don't know whether he was general or what he was on that base, he come in there and they read the charge. We were called up in a group of either five or eight. How did that go? One group got five years, another group got eight years. The other group got fifteen years. I think I was in the group that got eight years. I know I got eight. I'm trying to think how many was in each group. But the ring leader, they got fifteen, which they say was the ring leaders.
- Allen: So they shipped you out to San Pedro. How long were you actually there?
- Waldrop: Well, altogether we served a year. Then they pardoned us, in other words, let us out.
- Allen: And you shipped out from there to—?
- Waldrop: I went to Okinawa.
- Allen: With some of the other men?
- Waldrop: Yeah.
- Allen: They broke you up, right?
- Waldrop: Yeah, but I still stayed with Small, Sheppard, and a boy from Baltimore, can't think of his name. And I think Green.
- Allen: So you all were together there then.
- Waldrop: Yeah, we stayed together. I stayed with Small and Sheppard. Me and Small and Sheppard and the boy from Baltimore, and a boy named McGee. We all stayed together, the whole time I was in the service until I got out, until I got transferred. Then I left there after I come back from down there, I went to Philippines. When I left the Philippines I come back to Saipan. I left Saipan to come back to California. Where did we come back to—?
- Allen: Seattle?

Waldrop: No, we came back down to California. I'm trying to think where it was. But anyway. I got transferred I went on a {inaudible} ship's supposed to go to Boston, but I got to New Orleans, it broke down, so I got to New Orleans. I come home. I got discharged. Maybe someday, maybe someday it would make a book man, but it gonna be something like Custer's. I ain't kidding. The government ain't gonna hold still for it. They ain't gonna tell you nothing.

Allen: You know what I found out though -- when I came around the government to try and get records and so on, is that most of the people in the service now, they're young guys, even the officer are in their thirties. They don't know what—you say Port Chicago. They say, "What? Where? When?" They never heard of it. When I talked to them a little bit some of them get really interested 'cause they say what was going on, they're curious themselves. The older people, you know, they're still trying to {inaudible} but the younger ones they don't know what it's all about. They don't have any stake in protecting nothing but—I don't know, but it's hard to get any information 'cause it's—.

Waldrop: You've got them old head boys if any of 'em is around that know what went down, you know doggone well they ain't gonna let nobody say some sabotage that got in that base. That that much lax was going on on that base. Just like you had that scandal going on out there about this Navy hospital. Look how quick they got in there and covered that thing up. Before the guy could get through this talking to, get off the television they had the material in there.

Allen: That's right.

Waldrop: That show you how quick they can work if they want to. He hadn't even got off the air, see, that material was there.

Allen: So, you and Small and Sheppard, you all were buddies?

Waldrop: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I did have all them guys' names {inaudible}.

Allen: Do you have any pictures or anything from that time?

Waldrop: No. Well, I moved once or twice. See I wasn't married then.

Allen: Sheppard was married though. Sheppard was married. Small wasn't married. In fact, Sheppard I think had a little daughter that was born around the time, around the time of the trial.

Waldrop: Yeah, around the time, sure was. Banks was married.

- Allen: Banks was your partner in this too, then—.
- Waldrop: I think you said Banks was dead though didn't you?
- Allen: I think he is. I'll check again, but I'm pretty sure. I sent him a letter—.
- Waldrop: He was an amateur boxer you know? Wasn't too many—Matthews. Tried to look him up I know. New Orleans. McGee. Knox. I'd like to know what happened to Knox too. They tell me Knox went down there and got in more trouble. He went to New Caledonia. They say he got in trouble down there, stole a government truck.
- Allen: Oh, I know there was something else I wanted to ask you about too. Do you remember, was there some kind of fight between Ollie Green and Sheppard after the trial or around the time of the trial?
- Waldrop: That was between me and Ollie Green.
- Allen: You and Ollie Green.
- Waldrop: I hit him and I busted his head.
- Allen: What was that about?
- Waldrop: {inaudible} That was me and Green. He and Sheppard did too, I think once. It was me and him. We had gone down to San Pedro then and I asked him for a cigarette, and he told me something about my mother or something. And I popped him. But I think him and Sheppard, but I believe him and Sheppard got into it one time about Pinochle. 'Cause, see, we were great Pinochle players—me and him and Sheppard and Small. That's what made us such good buddies, see 'cause we played Pinochle. I was pretty good back in them days. We played 500, with double decks, see. I think him and Sheppard got in. Played cutthroat, too, see. I believed he and Sheppard did get in a fight about it. But I know me and him got in it, and I hit him up there over his ears. Busted his ears. Me and him, it was about a cigarette. {inaudible} But it was a pretty good group of guys; see, we kind of stuck together. We didn't haggle each other too much. Because we knowed we had too much time to be hazzling and razzling each other. We had time, we had eight to fifteen years to face, plus a dishonorable discharge when we got out, see. So we didn't fight too much among ourselves. We kind of looked out for each other.
- Allen: Did you have much trouble with the guards at San Pedro?

- Waldrop: No, not too, no no. 'Cause like I said, we had too much time. And see whatever one did, the guards would make it hard for all of us. We had found that out at Treasure Island. We found that out at Shoemaker. Whenever one of us messed up and did, it would go hard against the whole group. So other words, we didn't pull against each other too much. If we squabbled it would be among that group. We didn't socialize with the other prisoners too much. We stayed mostly to ourselves by ourselves. It wasn't the idea that we didn't socialize, we just didn't—they'd want to ask you about it. I know, they claimed it wasn't done, but I had the idea they did it. Couple of other guys around there—Small, Sheppard, and they put plants on us.
- Allen: At San Pedro or—?
- Waldrop: At Treasure Island. Before the trial. Put plants in us, white and colored. Planted them in there. So we got where we didn't trust nobody, except just the group. That's what made us conscious. See that's why we didn't associate with 'em. It wasn't the idea that they wouldn't socialize with us, we just didn't socialize with them. Other words, if we'd be setting down talking for instance me and you talking, just like that white dude walked in, we clamp up, talk about something else. When we played cards, we get our own group, and just sit down and talk that way.
- Allen: Did the guards make much trouble at Treasure Island—?
- Waldrop: Treasure Island?
- Allen: During and before the trial?
- Waldrop: It would be certain times that they try to get nasty with us. When we first went in there, they were nasty. Hell, the old, the guy that was in charge of that base, I don't know if he was a colonel, Marine, they'd usually have marines over us, he had three or four there from Mississippi, man. They're some pretty rough dudes, boy. But they didn't treat us so bad see because, like I said, we kind of stuck together. We stuck together too much and I guess they couldn't trust us. Either they wouldn't trust us because everything, if you see one. See what they tried to do when we first went in, they tried to break us up. Then find out they couldn't break us up. Just like, other words, you'd see maybe four or five of us, they be out on the group, so they didn't know how to trust us that way, see, so they couldn't break us up. Put us somewhere else in difference places. So they had to keep us in the same prison together. So they was kind of skeptical of us, they were scared of us in a way. Even when they get us out in groups to work, they wouldn't carry but two of us. Like if they had a group of eight or

ten going out on a work detail, well they might put one or two of us in each group, and then the rest of them, say we had six groups going out or maybe eight groups going out to do jobs around the base, they would let maybe two of us go in this group, two in that group, two in that group, maybe three. But it never was five of us in one group at one time. The rest of us would have to stay in, in the compound. Then the next day or later, they'll let you and another one and keep me. Say if I went out today, tomorrow they might keep me in, let us all get together.

- Allen: So, during recreation you could be together, but then at night they'd put you up in different barracks.
- Waldrop: Yeah, but in the daytime working time, in San Pedro we're working time, day is working time, recreation, we all work together. In San Pedro, when we work, we mostly all work together in our group. We stuck together, man. That bunch of men stuck together better than any bunch of blacks I've ever seen. 'Cause we was always with each other. Very seldom if one would get out of line. 'Cause we know once, we had talked it over, once one do something, then we all suffer, all fifty of us suffer. Other words, we was able to keep each other in line.
- Allen: Can I—[interruption] Is there anything else you'd like to add?
- Waldrop: Basic thing was they could never come direct out and prove mutiny. You can look all the way through the transcripts. You can look all the way through there, read every one of us, all fifty men's statement. You will find no way in there that the government really proved that we mutinied. Mutiny, man, that mean you don't work, period. But other words, so that's why I say, it was guilty, as far as the government was concerned. But as far as we're concerned, either as far as a lot of people is concerned, what they were supposed to have done was broke that base up or either brought the whites in. See, it was a lot of people didn't know that that base was that damned Jim Crow. It was even a lot of people in the service that didn't know that it was like. Hell, that base was worse than some places in Mississippi. It was rough. So they really didn't know that they had that kind of going on. So for that kind of publicity and stuff to get out, that hurt the Navy too. What did get out, hurt them. The publicity that did get out, that hurt man. Then they had to call the white boys and start unloading the ammunition.
- Allen: Yes. That's what they did. They got whites to come.
- Waldrop: Boy, we put a hurting on 'em.
- Allen: That's right, you did. [laughs]

Waldrop: We shook 'em up. They've never been shook up like that boy.

Allen: Well, I sure thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

Waldrop: You never had that many black stick together. We was close. They didn't want you sticking together. If you're divided, they got you in a bag of tricks.

Allen: Divide and conquer. Divide and conquer.

[End of Interview]