

The Oakland Army Base and the American Dream

It is no secret that the San Francisco Bay Area has long been known as a liberal bastion. This region has not only given the United States Congress many of its most liberal members but it has also generated a steady and, at times, vociferous critique of the United States military and its role in the world.¹ As a result of this critical stance, some argue, the San Francisco Bay Area lost nearly all of its federally-funded military installations, including the Oakland Army Base, over a short ten-year period of time beginning in 1988. Others argue the bases were closed primarily due to non-ideological, bureaucratic factors. Whatever the reasons behind the loss of these federally-funded institutions, little attention has been paid to the very real contributions made by these bases to local economies and job markets and the education of the populace.

Some scholars now argue that the military must be viewed as one of most highly developed arms of the otherwise underdeveloped U.S. welfare state.² In addition to providing enlisted personnel wages and access to health care, the military also subsidizes—and in some cases outright pays for—housing, education, childcare, mental health services, entertainment, and many other benefits. Although the benefits given to civilian employees of the Department of Defense do not measure up to those provided to enlisted personnel, the benefits remain substantial, including in many instances health care, childcare, and educational opportunities.

In this chapter, interviewees offer their perspectives on how the Oakland Army Base was one of the most far-reaching arms of the federal welfare state that touched the San Francisco Bay Area and left a lasting impact. The interviewees reveal how the OAB became a ladder for economic and social mobility for disadvantaged populations, including women, racial minorities, and those who had not completed their high school education. In other words, they tell how the OAB helped them to achieve the American Dream.

1. See: John Jacobs, *A Rage for Justice: The Passion and Politics of Philip Burton* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

2. See: Brian Gifford, "The Camouflaged Safety Net: The U.S. Armed Forces as Welfare State Institution" *Social Politics* vol. 13, no. 3 (2006): 372-399.

Educational Opportunity:

In the following passages Department of Defense civilian employees and enlisted personnel discuss the education programs hosted at the base and how these programs provided free or low-cost opportunities for individuals who otherwise may not have been able to pursue their education.

JIM JOHNSON

JOHNSON: I'll tell you how I arrived at Oakland Army Base and got my civil service appointment. I was teaching school at night at Golden Gate University. I taught algebra one, algebra two, and statistics. And so this one semester in 1970, there was an older fellow in the class and he was quite a bit older than the rest of the students. He was probably fifty. And another thing that was unusual about him was that he was not doing well. He had flunked every one of the weekly exams that I had given. So I called him aside and I said, "Owen, you're not doing well in this course." And he said, "I know. I knew that I wouldn't do well." And he said, "I was scared, so I've saved this course for the very last." I said, "Are you an MBA candidate?" And he said, "Yes, I am." And he said, "This is the only course that I need to complete my degree." And I said, "Well, you were supposed to take this course long before you took your graduate seminars." And he said, "Well, I put it off until last because I knew that I would have trouble with it." And I said, "Well, somebody told you that and you believed it, and that was a self-fulfilling prophecy." But I added, "This course is not difficult and you're very bright, and you can get through it well, but you're going to have to have some outside help, and I will be happy to assist you with that if you are willing to come to my house every Saturday morning at nine o'clock. I can work with you for a couple of hours and I think that I can get you up to speed so that you can complete this course successfully, because it is a requirement for your degree." And he said, "Well, if you're willing to do that, Jim, I'm certainly willing to do it, too." So that's what we did. He came to my house every Saturday morning at nine o'clock and we worked for one or two hours, and we did that for four weeks, and he developed the confidence in the material that he needed to complete the course successfully. And so he was very pleased and so was I.

So I attended his graduation. I normally didn't go to graduations, but I was so pleased for Owen that I attended the graduation. And at the graduation, he said, "Jim, what do you do? What's your real job during the day?" And I said, "Well, I work for Matson Navigation Company and they had a reduction in force and I was caught in that, so I'm between jobs for my daytime work." He said, "You don't know who I really am, do you?" And I said, "Well, your name is Owen Walsh and you completed my course successfully and you have your MBA and I'm very proud of you." He said,

“Jim, I’m a full bird colonel in the United States Army and I’m the chief of staff at the Oakland Army Base.” And he said, “We have an education officer out there that can’t find her ass with a search warrant, and I would like for you to have that job.”

He explained, “You’ll come out there and you’ll report directly to me. You’ll work at the education center and you’ll be the assistant to the education officer and she will see that you’re really doing her work and she’s going to resign and you’re going to have the job.” And so that’s exactly what happened. This went on for about two months. The lady who was the education officer did, in fact, resign and that’s how I became an employee at the Oakland Army Base. And it sounds kind of underhanded in a way, but actually it worked out just fine, because the lady really wasn’t doing the work and I just caught on to that really quickly and really enjoyed it and it worked out fine, so all’s well that end’s well.

LI: And so your starting position was director of education?

JOHNSON: I was the education services officer. And eventually I became the acting chief of community services. As the community services officer, that included all of the craft shop, the bowling alley, the gym, the housing area, all of the facilities that had to do with community service, and I was doing that and running the education center, as well.

LI: Can you tell me about the state of the education services when you arrived and how it evolved?

JOHNSON: Well, Colonel Walsh was really so pleased with the fact that I was so interested in helping him that he felt that that might transfer to the people for whom he was responsible at the Oakland Army Base, the military people, and so that’s why he wanted me to have that job. I was very conscientious and dedicated to make sure that every enlisted person who did not have a high school diploma was enrolled in our on-post GED classes. So that every enlisted person who did not have a high school diploma would leave Oakland Army Base with the GED equivalency.

LI: Was this a requirement or was this something that you just took on?

JOHNSON: It was an encouragement, but with the backing of Colonel Walsh, we made it at Oakland Army Base an absolute requirement.

LI: So would you get a list of the people who did not have high school diplomas?

JOHNSON: Yes, yes. And then they would send the people to me. I would counsel them and there was a one hundred percent enrollment. These were just people that, for some reason or another, didn’t have a high school diploma. And it was interesting the way we funded this, because at most military bases, the education center would hire teachers to run the GED program on the base. Well, I didn’t have any money to do that, so I contacted the principal of Oakland Technical High School and I said,

“You know, you don’t really have the time to be running your GED program here in the high school, and you’re overcrowded. I have a tremendous facility at Oakland Army Base, so I’ll make you a deal: you provide me with the teachers and you can use the facility that I have at Oakland Army Base.” I added, “This will take some doing to allow outside civilians to come aboard the base, but I’m pretty sure I can pull that off, and it’ll be a good working arrangement between the educational community and the military community.” And so with Colonel Walsh’s backing, I was able to get the general to agree that we would allow non-military people on the base.

So I provided the facility and the Oakland Unified School District provided the teachers in math and English, and the program was conducted during the day and the military people were given time off of their duties to attend the classes. It also meant that I didn’t have to budget and pay the teachers because they were paid by the Oakland Unified School District, and so they had all the benefits that the teachers had being part of the district. And so it was a win/win situation for them, and it was a win/win situation for me, and it was a win/win situation for the students who were in the class, as well. And it was also a good mixture of having the military people sitting right next to civilian people in the outside community and it was a great relationship. And as a matter of fact, it gave Oakland Army Base a good name in that we were cooperating with the outside community, and the general took great credit for this, which was perfect. I was happy for him to have the credit. Since this program was being run really by the Oakland Unified School District, the diploma was given by the Oakland Unified School District, not by the Oakland Army Base, so these people had an actual diploma from Oakland Technical High School. To my knowledge, no other army base had a program in which the graduates of the GED program had such credentials.

LI: You also had officers who were doing MBA programs at Golden Gate University?

JOHNSON: Well, yes. After we got the people who didn’t have a high school diploma requirement met, then, of course, there were all of these enlisted men and women on Oakland Army Base who did have a high school diploma but who needed to have a baccalaureate degree. And so the next step was to take care of these people. So I found a college in Columbia, Missouri—Columbia College—who gave off campus programs on military bases, and they were very generous in awarding credit for military experience and for awarding credit for passing the end-of-course test. And so I contracted with this college to put their program on Oakland Army Base, and also I got the guy who did my job at Treasure Island [Naval Base] to do the same there, so we had quite a population, between Oakland Army Base and Treasure Island enlisted people, for participating in this program in which the only degree that was offered was a baccalaureate degree in business administration.

After we got the enlisted people taken care of with the GED program and the baccalaureate degree program, we didn’t want to leave out the officers who needed



3.1 Columbia College students, 1980. Many military personnel were able to complete college degrees while stationed at OAB. *(Courtesy of Jim Johnson)*

to have an MBA. And I didn't have enough population of officers to have on-post classes for MBA, so they had to attend the main campus at Golden Gate University in San Francisco.

With the GED program I didn't have to pay for that because the Oakland Unified School District traded off: they provided the teachers and I provided the space. But with Columbia College being a private school, of course they charged tuition. So the question is how were my military students going to pay that tuition? On most military bases, the education center had a budget called tuition assistance, and it was a very lengthy paper process. Each one of these students had to fill out these forms and the education officer had to be a part of all of that and the tuition assistance paid seventy-five percent of the tuition and it was very complicated to budget for this because, you know, how many students were you going to have and how much money would you need. Well, we didn't have to do any of that at Oakland Army Base because I insisted that the students use their in-service GI Bill. You did not have to wait to get out of the service to use your GI Bill. You could use the GI Bill while you were in service, and the GI Bill paid 100% of the tuition, and also, since it was the GI Bill, and Columbia College knew about how to use that, then they took care of the paperwork, so that meant I didn't have to worry about how it was being paid for. So we were running a full scale program for a GED program and for the baccalaureate

degree in business administration and the MBA program at Oakland Army Base and the only cost to Oakland Base was my salary and that of my secretary. It was unheard of for an education center to be running a full service all the way from GED to MBA with the salaries of two people and that's it.

LI: Did you get the sense that the students you worked with would have gotten these degrees anyway?

JOHNSON: I don't think so. First of all, the program had to be available, and it had to be easily available. And they had to be motivated to do it. But once the ball got rolling, it was almost like if you weren't in one of the programs at the education center, you just weren't in. And so it became a thing for everyone to be involved in, it became the culture of that base life. The general said to me one day, "Jimmy, I can't get anything done because all my military people are in school." And I said, "Well, that really isn't true because they're all doing it in their own time, except for the GED people, and I really appreciate your letting them have time off during the day for that program. But the people that are in school are on their own time and they are dedicated and doing this after they are no longer working for you."

And then not only did we have those programs going, but we had the craft shop that was putting on classes and I thought, "My goodness, why can't we get the Oakland Junior College?" There was Merritt and Laney in Oakland, and then there was Vista College, which was their off-campus program. So I contacted Vista College and they agreed to use our facility, the craft shop. Instead of our having to hire teachers to teach classes at the craft shop, Vista College took advantage of our facility and provided the teachers to put on the classes in the craft shop. We had upholstery, woodworking, pottery, ceramics, and jewelry. And not only that, the people who were taking these classes got college credit. Some base personnel even became members of the faculty of Vista, and so they were working during their daytime job, took annual leave at night, and were hired by Vista College to teach the classes that they would normally be teaching anyway. So that was another win/win situation.

LI: So at its peak, how many people do you think were involved in your programs?

JOHNSON: Well, I would say a couple hundred.

LI: The education program was never for civilian employees?

JOHNSON: No. Well, the civilian employees had their own education program. I had a counterpart who worked for civilian personnel and that person allegedly did for the civilians what I did for the military. Except it didn't happen, and, of course, the civilian employees were not allowed to have time off.

FRED GOWAN

GOWAN: Every army base has an education center and I was busy taking every class I could because I knew I was going to be applying for a “boot strap,” which was the program that the army had for college. They were all like Golden Gate University, University of California.

LAGE: Did they come to the base to teach?

GOWAN: Some of them did. Some of them you had to go. Like Golden Gate University, you actually had to go. And they would also come to Treasure Island where I lived, where I took accounting and statistics. Sometimes I would get off early because I had class, and I’d go down there in uniform and sit in on the class.

LOUISE HARRIS

LAGE: Do you remember what kind of an interview they gave you or how they decided what job you would have?

HARRIS: Well, they asked me what I had done and based on my application, I was given a clerk job. I didn’t know how to type yet. I remember that. I was there from about ’45 to ’48 before I got laid off, then I came back to Oakland Army Base about 1950 and then I stayed until I retired on January 3, 1984.

The people at the Oakland Army Base were very nice to me, and I had two people particularly I think that helped me a lot. James Johnson was a training officer. He lived in San Francisco, and he encouraged me to go back to school, and so it was difficult because of the children but he insisted. Columbia College, of Columbia, Missouri, offered courses at Oakland Army Base at night for civilian and military, and so I was one of the civilians who attended, and I received my BA degree in Business Administration. I received my BA in 1978. And I also took advantage of several courses that were offered at the army base. I learned to do upholstery; I did all my furniture. I remember time management class, and there were several other classes. Engraving, I learned to engrave because I was doing awards, that was one of my jobs, and I had to do the plaques, had to engrave the names on the plaques. I learned that too at the Oakland Army Base.

LAGE: Now, I haven’t heard much about these courses being offered at the Oakland Army Base. Was this a big feature of employment there, that there was a range of courses you could take?

HARRIS: Well, they would have people come in and do these classes. They were free, the government paid for me to go.

LAGE: How did those classes in getting your BA affect your job? Was it beneficial?

HARRIS: Well, I don't know that it helped that much. [laughter] That's why I retired, because I didn't advance as I thought I should, and I was at the top of my grade. I don't know that not being promoted, unless in that particular instant you feel you were discriminated against. But I didn't feel that.

DAVETTA THIBEAUX

LI: What were your plans after high school?

THIBEAUX: Well, in Vallejo in those days companies would come out and recruit high school graduates for jobs. So the telephone company came out and recruited, so I worked one year for the phone company. And then after that, I went to keypunch school and got a job working at the Oakland Army Base from '66 to '67.

I married in 1968, and I have two children from that marriage. But then we separated in 1974. And so then I went into the service—United States Army. I was going to go into the army and get some GI benefits. What influenced me to go in the army, I had a first cousin—she was really very beautiful—her name was Paulette. And I thought she had everything going for her. She was born in '41. And she went into the army. And it changed her life, and she got to travel. And then she was telling me you could go into the service with children, which that is true. At that time, a female soldier could have her children live with her at her duty station, so Paulette went in 1974—and then I went in in '76. I went in as she was getting out. I went to Fort Eustis, Virginia, to the U.S. Army School of Transportation and was trained to be a troop movement specialist.

But I left the army in '77. I didn't even get to stay quite two years. The army gave me an honorable discharge because of family hardship. My husband got sick, the American Red Cross notified me that my husband was very sick and I needed to return to California. And then what I decided to do was, I had the GI Bill, so I went to school on the GI Bill. Went to Laney College and San Francisco State. I was a social science major. And then I thought I wanted to teach, so when I went to San Francisco State, I majored in communication studies.

But I returned to the Oakland Army Base in '85 because I needed a job! My grandmother told me, because my kids are getting older now, so she told me, she said—my nickname is Dave—so Granny said, “Dave, you know what? You need to concentrate on your children.” And that was true, because their dad had died in 1980 of a heart attack. So it was just me. I had extended family, in terms of my family being supportive, but it wouldn't be fair for me to expect them to just watch my kids while I just went to school, like I'm just a carefree, single, no parent student. So I needed a job. And so that's how I got into the government. Started first at HUD, and then transferred over to Oakland Army Base.

LI: So you were a civilian employee?

THIBEAUX: I was a civilian employee, and worked in morale support—I got a job first in supply, and then they had an opening, which was like a promotion, to GS-5, as a recreation specialist. So I worked in what was called army family community services, which provides resource and supportive services to military families and their dependents.

JANICE McDONALD

LI: So the classes you took at Chabot College were they through the base, like through Jim Johnson's programs, or were they independent?

McDONALD: No, we went to Chabot College, but these were something that the government would pay for, so they would do probably a purchase order or something and we would go. So you just kind of went to keep your mind going.

LI: It seems like a great opportunity to gain skills. So there's Golden Gate University as well as Oakland Army Base, so you would go to private colleges, non-military?

McDONALD: Yeah, we get credit for college course going to Golden Gate University there.

LI: What was upward mobility? What were the responsibilities of upward mobility?

McDONALD: Well, we would go to different departments like general commodities, special commodities, and the SRO branch, which is the standing route order branch, so that was the upward mobility—learning all the branch workload. And I think at the time, too, because I was always a good typist—one time I was like employee of the quarter and they gave me a monetary amount, but it's because I think I filled in when someone was sick and just kind of did triple the workload or whatever and helped them out, and so mainly, yeah, that was part of the upward mobility.

JOHN COMPISI

LAGE: One of the things we noticed as we've been interviewing is that the base was a place of opportunity, a place of upward mobility.

COMPISI: I think the army as a whole, absolutely.

LAGE: And the emphasis on education. Is that something you observed? People being encouraged to further their education?

COMPISI: Absolutely. Training and education. People were very much encouraged to take courses. The army would subsidize some of the coursework as part of their annual training. They would be encouraged to take civilian courses. And they can be subsidized for a certain amount of dollars every year for civilian education. And definitely

encouraged upward mobility. That's how you got promoted, was by showing that interest in self-development, personal development.

LAGE: And then on the civilian side too.

COMPISI: Absolutely. That's what I was talking about specifically: the army at large and civilians with the Defense Department. I'm very proud of the army.

AMY ESTRADA

ESTRADA: One of the things that is very advantageous about working for the army is that we have different funding, what we call it the "army industrial fund." So we are not affected by the whims and the winds of change in Congress—we have a regular pot of money. One good thing we have in the base is a lot of training money. A lot of other government agencies are not as lucky. In the army if you need training, you can just say, "Can I go to this training?" And they usually would allow you to do it if it's related to your job. I think that's very advantageous.

LI: Did you take advantage of that while you were there?

ESTRADA: Yes. I took advantage of taking some budget and auditing classes, because I was not a budget person. But I also took advantage of training on my time. I took it at night, because to some extent part of me didn't want to make public the fact that I want to be more a computer person. I wanted to do it privately, so I did not tell them that I'm taking this computer classes at UC Berkeley Extension. I think that's one of the reasons why I ended up getting an analyst job; because I had taken those classes. I know some people who were accountants. Once the base closed, it was very hard for them to get a job because there were no accounting jobs around anymore. So you have to diversify and find other related jobs that you qualify for.

MARY MYERS

LAGE: You got your BA while you were at the base?

MYERS: I did.

LAGE: And was that something that was encouraged among the employees overall?

MYERS: Well, of course, the military could not pay for your entire degree, but they could pay for a majority of it. And I'm a single mom. I'm trying to do the best I can. And whenever there was free education, I tried to take advantage of it. And even my AA degree I got through the Port of Oakland. That was actually 100% funded through the Port of Oakland. Thank you, Port of Oakland. [laughs] As you completed each class, then they would reimburse you. But it's against the law for the military to pay for your degree. So they can pay for a lot of your classes, as long as they're related to your job—and they will assist you.

LAGE: Did you encourage your employees to further their education?

MYERS: Oh, sure. But a lot of them weren't interested. You have to remember that most of the people that worked for me were blue-collar people. And for a lot of them, the only thing they ever did in their whole life was drive a forklift. And that's why it was so traumatic for them when the BRAC happened, because there wasn't that many forklift jobs any more. But on the other hand, it forced a lot of them to go back to school.

Labor, Unions, and Organizing the Waterfront:

The Oakland Army Base was the site of unionized work, especially among longshore workers, teamsters, stevedores, and others who were contractors on the waterfront. In the passages that follow, interviewees discuss issues of importance to labor.

CLEOPHAS WILLIAMS

RIGELHAUPT: In the 1940s and 50s, who else besides the ILWU worked at the Oakland Army Base? What were the other types of jobs that you saw going on at the army base?

WILLIAMS: Civil Service jobs. We were always trying to organize the workers, but we were told to keep hands off, but we wanted those workers in the union. And many of the workers had heard about the ILWU, and they wanted to know how they could improve their benefits. I'm trying to think what it was called, but for workers who did the same work as union workers did, they were to get similar pay, and the government did that for a long time. First we got it, sometimes through struggle, sometimes through strikes. And after we got it, they did too—it was a 'me too' thing.

RIGELHAUPT: You said the forties and the fifties were hard times. When would you describe a period of expansion or growth in waterfront work in the Bay Area?

WILLIAMS: It came along with the 1960 contract, the container contract. That's when things changed. You had a change in leadership with the employers. That change of leadership meant you didn't see yourselves as adversaries. You saw yourselves as the same people in the same industry, trying to get along. Prior to the '48 strike, and prior to Korea, everything seemed so adversarial, and that changed, to some extent, after we had new leadership among the ship owners. I don't remember their names but they negotiated the container contract that the men in this area didn't like because of the insertion of steady men. We had always been against steady company men. The company contended that they had to have steady men in order to be competitive.

RIGELHAUPT: When you say steady men, what do you mean?

WILLIAMS: Men who worked regularly for the company, instead of coming out of the hall.

RIGELHAUPT: Did the use of steady men also take place at the Oakland Army Base?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. That's a different ball game, but what happened there, because the certain companies, when they had their work, they'd take these mobile cranes into the army base and do that work where needed. These fellows went where the companies wanted them to go, and they were good at what they did because they worked steady for the company. They're on the same equipment day after day, and when they weren't working so much, they were helping the mechanics spot what was wrong with the equipment. It became a relationship between the companies and the steady men that the union didn't like because men became more loyal to the company than they were to the union.

RIGELHAUPT: About that time in 1960, with the contract that led to containerization, did you see a parallel increase in containerization at the Oakland Army Base?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I really don't know what was going on there because I saw Pier 4 become a commercial pier. I've forgotten the name of the company, but they went into Pier 4, and they became a real contender. As small as it is, we think we have the best union in the world because we protect our men across the board, and women across the board. They are protected equally, and we couldn't ask for more. Even in retirement, they are protected. It's a union that has done so much for the people, in and out of the union. Sail the banner high.

GEORGE COBBS

RIGELHAUPT: In the first year you started working as a longshoreman (1965), how often did you have to work at the Oakland Army Base?

COBBS: We didn't have to work there. It was kind of a choice. In the longshore industry, when you get opportunity, you try to pick the best job that's available from the dispatch. So, on many occasions, when some of the other better jobs that we thought were gone, we would choose the army base because of the nature of the work.

RIGELHAUPT: Well, how did the work at the army base compare to work at other job sites?

COBBS: At the army base, most of the work there in those days was palletized loads, where they use a lot of forklifts. You know, like if you were in a different position in the dispatch, you could be working coffee, where you would have to be lifting 150 or 140-pound sacks all day. So, the army base was kind of a different place to work. It was probably more easy to work there than other job opportunities.

RIGELHAUPT: And it was mostly easier because of the type, the way the cargo was packaged?

COBBS: Unitized, yes. Yes.

RIGELHAUPT: Did you immediately start having jobs at the Oakland Army Base when you first started working with the ILWU?

COBBS: Heck, no. I think my first job was in the freezer. Then I worked hides, then I worked coffee. To get on army bases was not easy to get. When you first come, you're low on the totem pole. When they get dispatched, if they got those jobs left, you have to be really lucky. But, in those days, they had a lot of work, so sometimes they would have a lot of that work left. Not until I become an 'A man,' where I had a solid choice of what I wanted to work, or where I wanted to work. But, in those days, you'd take what was left.

RIGELHAUPT: Well, what were your first impressions of the ILWU in 1965?

COBBS: I made more money in three days than I previously made in a week, so my impression was of being fulfilled for my work effort. The ILWU is interesting. In those days, and still today, it's got a wonderful teaching method. A lot of those old guys who, some didn't read and write well, did things experientially. They told you stories, and they were good teachers, which is important on this job because it's dangerous. They had their way of telling you, "Don't get yourself killed." You want to leave like you come to this industry, which, a lot of times, we have a lot of injuries, so a lot of people are not fortunate enough to do it. But they would say, like, for example, if you keep standing abreast of the load, and something happens, and then you get yourself killed, then I will have to go home and tell your wife, her money is short because you got killed. And I don't want to do that. [laughs] And I remember that story for forty years. It was just one of the ways that they would teach you something about safety that you will never forget it. So these guys, they were great. It was a great atmosphere, the best of all worlds.

RIGELHAUPT: What were some of the first things you learned about the history of the union when you first started working in 1965?

COBBS: That here is a union that knew how to do things, and they put their money where their mouth is. That was the thing that I was most impressed with is, they were just not a union that talked about things, but they would do things. They would take on a cause, where there was a good cause, and I liked that about it. I liked the fact that we were not a corrupt union. I learned that real early about it, that this union has a great deal of principle about it, and I kind of love that here's a place where you could come and work, and not worry about getting sold out. Harry Bridges was still here when I come. Harry Bridges was the president another twelve years after I come into

this union. I had a lot of opportunity to hear him speak, and to be impressed by a man who had a vision and to see it come into fulfillment. Today, we're still living part of his dream, which is a good thing.

RIGELHAUPT: I've read that around 1960 was the big contract with the ILWU that started the containerization.

COBBS: Yes. You're talking about the M and M [Mechanization and Modernization Agreement]. It was a way that they knew this was coming, what we have today, and they paid the ILWU for the abilities to move ahead with new technology. When I come, the implementation of what they did in '60 was probably just starting to come off the drawing board.

RIGELHAUPT: Could you describe how you saw containerization be implemented, and how it affected your work?

COBBS: Well, when you talk about containerization and stuff, most of the cargo now goes from door to door. They put it in the container, and they go from door to door. So, how it affects us is a reduced amount of people that you need. They could load a container ship with probably twenty guys, or maybe thirty. In those days, you would need almost that many to do just the gangs. I mean, you would need six to eight gangs to try to load what they could do in a day. You couldn't do what a containerization ship can take in a day. The biggest impact it had is, it reduced the amount of men that you need to load the same amount of cargo.

RIGELHAUPT: But, at the same time, the union was hiring, as well. Is that because there was a wave of retirements, or was there just more work?

COBBS: Probably more work. It was, I think, anticipation that we were going to get all of the work stuffing and un-stuffing the containers, which was partially true. Some of the employers moved the loading of containers out of our jurisdiction, which is fifty miles away. So that didn't happen as anticipated, but we still hired a lot of men between '59 and '69, a lot of men.

LEO ROBINSON

ROBINSON: When women came onto the waterfront, there were certain changes that I knew were going to have to be made on the waterfront. So I was ready for that and I advocated it. But one of the most pressing needs for women, and especially the younger women who were of childbearing age, is childcare. I had gotten a hold of a couple of the women on the waterfront and I didn't do it for them, I made them do it—to write a resolution on the establishment of a pilot childcare center on part of the old army base. They had the perfect setup—you know, there was a childcare center already there. And my vision of that was to take that and make it a pilot project where

not only could the women on the waterfront take their children twenty-four hours a day with competent staff, professional staff, but to open it up to other unions, as well. You know, it's easier for a woman who's working in San Francisco to detour off and come to the army base, drop her kid off, and get on the bridge and go to work, right, then it is for her to run around town. I remember my daughter-in-law, she lived over on East Seventeenth Avenue and she had to drive from East Seventeenth Avenue over to Eighth Street to drop my grandson off to childcare and then go out to Concord where she worked. So I saw that as one of the possibilities for a longshoreman.

Race, Gender, and Equal Opportunity on the Base:

*A*lthough the defense industry was desegregated in World War II and the U.S. military desegregated in 1948, divisions of race and gender continued to impact military installations into the 1980s. And, as of this writing, gay men and lesbians are still barred from serving openly in the armed forces. In the following passages, interviewees discuss the process by which the Department of Defense attempted to address historical racial and gender inequalities through practices such as affirmative action in hiring and promotion at the OAB.

PAUL JANOFF

Paul Janoff was an enlisted navy attorney with the Alameda Naval Air Station before he was hired as civilian labor counselor at the OAB in 1989. In the following passage, Janoff reflects upon his work at both military installations.

MEEKER: I'm interested in the questions around discrimination in the workforce. You said that if someone didn't get a job, for instance, they might say, "It happened because I was discriminated against, and therefore there needs to be some sort of remediation." Can you discuss the various racial groups involved and if there was any difference in the ways in which the various groups claimed discrimination?

JANOFF: Well, the number one ethnic group that files equal employment complaints are white people, white males. So what I would say is that the system works fairly. The federal system, because it is a free system where you don't have to pay anything to get into the system, unlike private sector where you would have to hire an attorney to go to court, I'm afraid encourages complaints. That didn't bother me because I viewed it—again, this is twenty years ago—as solid experience. You know, I actually wanted the complaints to come my way.

MEEKER: Did you find that there were a certain percentage of the complaints that were justified or was there a rational explanation in most cases?

JANOFF: I would say—no. I would say out of ten cases, maybe one was somewhat justified. Maybe. I think most of the people who filed were simply angry—and frustrated with poor management. They were simply bitter that they were not selected and this acrimony manifested itself in these complaints. And the EEOC finds discrimination in less than 10 percent of the cases.

MEEKER: In those one out of ten cases, what recourse was given to the complainant?

JANOFF: Most of the time, they simply got the job. They were placed in the job, and if there was already an incumbent, we just made a new job. It was very simple. The court orders you, “Put them in that job,” you do. There’s not much room for maneuvering.

MEEKER: So with the notion that it was mostly white men who were complaining, was that a result of the fact that by the 1980s, a great deal of the civilian leadership would have been African Americans or Latinos? Were they responding to what were perceived to be affirmative action policies?

JANOFF: You know, I really don’t know the answer to that. I think it’s a superb question but I don’t know. I just know that complaints were increasing, but I really don’t have an answer for that. I wish I could, but it’s a very good question.

MEEKER: Were there affirmative action policies that you had to adjudicate in some way?

JANOFF: Oh, absolutely. We had consent decrees at the Alameda Naval Air Station, and that was that there was a dearth, a paucity of Hispanic employees on the base, and I believe in 1978, the federal district court had ordered us to do everything we could to hire more Hispanic people at the naval air station. We also recruited at black colleges. We were trying. But again, my own perception was that people looked at the military with a lot of suspicion. Remember, Reagan was the commander-in-chief and I think that Hispanics just simply did not want to come work for the government. There was a basic distrust, which exists today, of the government. So yes, I was working all the time with consent decrees, with active recruitment, retention programs to keep minorities, mentoring programs. One school that we adopted to target for recruitment when I was at the Oakland Army Base was the Ralph Bunche School.

MEEKER: What role did an attorney have in fulfilling these consent decrees?

JANOFF: Well, when we hired someone, I would always make sure that we did everything we could to recruit in a Hispanic area. You know, did we send out notices to the newspapers, did we go to schools, did we send out announcements in Spanish? There were all kinds of things that we needed to do. I didn’t always review every hire but that was our job. I think we had to get up to something like 18 percent Hispanic hiring. We never got to that number, though.

MEEKER: Did it matter what kind of jobs or was this an 18 percent across the board?

JANOFF: It was an 18 percent across the board.

MEEKER: Most of the managers that you were working with, people in charge of the hiring: was it a multiracial group?

JANOFF: No, it was white males. Overwhelming—90 percent white males. This is in the '80s.

MEEKER: Was there any ethnic group, I assume, other than whites who were adequately or overrepresented?

JANOFF: No.

MEEKER: What about the position of African Americans or Asians on the base?

JANOFF: There were many African Americans, but they were primarily relegated to lower graded positions. I can't remember one black supervisor. There may have been, but I can't remember any. But they were mostly what you would say worker bees. That's how I remember it. Lots of Filipinos, but again, in lower level. It was so predominantly white male at the Naval Air Station [in the early 80s] that I sort of see this monolithic block of white managers. That's how I remember it.

MEEKER: Filipinos, they were considered Asian?

JANOFF: Yes.

MEEKER: I'm very interested in how the federal government determines who's black, who's Asian, and who's Latino. Latino is not specifically a racial category but primarily an ethnic and language category. Filipinos can be sometimes placed in Latino category, sometimes placed in Asian, sometimes neither. These are imprecise categories that the government often will work with as if they were precise categories. Were you ever confronted with these difficulties of definition?

JANOFF: In the 1980s, there was very, very little guidance as to who was who. It was pretty much a do it yourself selection process. In other words, if you said you were a white, not Hispanic, that's the box you checked. So you had, as I recall, five or six boxes. White, white-Hispanic, Pacific Islander, African American, American Indian. I think those were it, as I recall. But this was a work in progress. And under President Reagan, I would say the rights of minorities were not on the short list of the executive branch. You know, I think it was a system that favored white people and perpetuated a culture of white managers—white male managers, especially in the military. I cannot speak to other agencies. But that's what I saw. I saw it from the day I arrived in the military in 1980 and I saw it the day I left on January 31, 1989.

Then, in 1989 I was hired by the Oakland Army Base as a labor counselor, GS-13, which would be a senior civilian position. My primary duties would be defending the government in civilian personnel litigation. My workload was overwhelming. I was handling many discrimination cases. They were coming in at a rate of about one

every three weeks. The reason for that is we had an enormous workforce of 800 to 1,000 people in Oakland. We had various other ports too—Seattle, Hawaii, Southern California. Complaints came from there, as well. I remember going to Alaska. They were part of the Oakland Army Base's command; they were subcommands. And I was responsible for providing legal assistance, training, and defending the cases. Most of the cases were nonselections. Everyone in the federal government wants a higher grade. And when you don't get the higher grade again, there's a lot of bitterness—people are angry and they file complaints.

MEEKER: Describe to me what the higher grade is because I'm not quite sure what that means.

JANOFF: Well, the government has four pay systems, but I'm going to use the most common, which is the government GS, or general schedule. And within it are fifteen grades, one through fifteen. Within the grades are ten steps, and everyone wants to move from—let's see. I was hired as a GS-13, \$41,000. Well, my goal is to become a GS-14, where I might be hired at \$50,000. Because the key is not so much the money you earn now, though that helps. It's all about retirement and how your retirement is affected. Your thrift savings plan contribution and your retirement. I'm not an expert in this, but that's the reason and rationale people cite over and over again for wanting a higher grade. So I had many cases—they all sort of run together now, but they were cases of non-selections, employee discipline, of bargaining with the unions.

MEEKER: What percentage of these hinged on the question of discrimination on race?

JANOFF: All of them.

MEEKER: All of them. What about gender?

JANOFF: Secondary. I don't have percentages, but most everybody, whether they were white or black, cited their race.

MEEKER: And again here, were most of the complainants white men?

JANOFF: After I moved from Alameda Naval Air Station to the Oakland Army Base in 1989 it change to about 50/50, I would say, because the work force was probably 50 percent black at the Oakland Army Base. Though these are approximations and it was a long time ago.

MEEKER: So it sounds like the workforce was demographically quite different than it was on Alameda?

JANOFF: Yes. And I attribute that to being really in the heart of Oakland—the heart of West Oakland. Yes, absolutely.

MEEKER: So you attribute that to the proximity?

JANOFF: 100 percent. Yes.

MEEKER: On these questions of discrimination, did you find also that at the Oakland Army Base it was about 10 percent legitimate or was it different?

JANOFF: I would say about 10 percent legitimate. Very consistent percentages, yes.

MEEKER: How did the army base deal with hiring managers who may have a track record of being discriminatory?

JANOFF: Well, when people apply for a job, whether they had had any complaints against them. I don't think it's a fair question to ask or it's something we would want to know. What often happens is that after a judge finds discrimination, the judge gives the agency a grace period. And let's make up a number of sixty days to settle the case and say, "And if you settle the case and give the complainant the remedy that he or she is seeking, I will not issue a final decision. There will be no discrimination found." So we would settle the case. And this is done throughout the federal government. No admission of liability, so nobody's guilty. The person obtains relief. There is no finding of discrimination. So that's often what you do. You read the tea leaves and say, you know, "She's told us what she's doing to do. She's given us a chance to fix this without a formal finding." So you would not find, for the most part, a record because a manager could, in good faith, say, "I have no discrimination against me because of that grace period that the judge allots."

MEEKER: What happens after you've been working there for a period of time? Do you notice that certain managers have a tendency to have complaints against them?

JANOFF: Yes, we did. You address that with formal counseling, with training, and sometimes even with discipline. You know who the managers are. More often than not, the bad managers were the ones who were did not necessarily have a discriminatory animus, as we would say in the trade, but they were simply bad managers. They were vindictive, vengeful. They were culturally insensitive. They were bombastic, full of themselves. And this was a small percentage. But rarely did I find a discriminatory motive. I just found that they were mean. They were just mean-spirited, angry people.

BOB NORDAN

NORDAN: When I arrived, we were under a consent decree from the federal court to increase the number of Hispanic employees at the base. We would meet as a committee to provide input, to see the monthly statistics and to respond to any requests that we had associated with that. So that was a big thing that we went through, probably for the first five or six years that I was at the base, trying to meet those goals that had been mandated to the base.

RUBENS: Now, how was that initiated?

NORDAN: It was initiated through a lawsuit. There was a lawsuit filed by one of our employees, and then entered into and supported by, I think, some Hispanic organizations in the community. And it resulted in a consent decree, where the court said in order to satisfy the more equal distribution of ethnic employees at Oakland Army Base, we needed to reach certain goals. And at that time, I think it was 6 percent or 7 percent of the employees to be Hispanic. The goals were set by the court based upon the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area survey of ethnic distribution within a hiring area that determines if you are in balance with the percentage reflective of the community.

RUBENS: And did you see there start to be a change in the employee demographics?

NORDAN: There was. Before I finished, and I think it was before I became the executive staff officer, we met the goal and the consent decree was lifted. When I was at the Oakland Army Base the majority of employees, when you combine all the ethnicities, were from minority groups. So it was more than 50 percent minority—a very large portion of employees drawing from Oakland, so a large African American population. Large Asian, Pacific Islander population, as well. Grew to a larger employment pool of Hispanics, as well. The base provided a tremendous amount of opportunity for someone who wanted to work for civil service. And we provided a lot of upward mobility.

RUBENS: Well, you yourself went to the top.

NORDAN: Yes, I came in as a GS-9 from Georgia, and seven years later, was a GS-14. So there was an opportunity for a lot of mobility. Provided training, provided assistance, provided opportunity for everyone who really wanted to do a good job. And there were just a ton of very dedicated, outstanding, hard working people at Oakland Army Base. And civilians that work for the government get a bad rap. And all you need is for a couple of bad instances, and everybody tends to paint the entire civilian workforce with that same brush. And that's not the case. A lot of talented people that could've gone and worked in a lot of other places were working at Oakland Army Base—not just because of a job, but out a sense of contributing to the government and to the military. And over time, the civilian employees developed a real loyalty to the military. You could see how your contribution was assisting something special.

SYDNEY SANTOS

RUBENS: You were under a mandate to have a diversified staff?

SANTOS: Oh yes. And in fact, one of the women that worked for me, applied for an intern. That was where you started out as a GS-5 and you were trained for all of the aspects of the human resources, and you ended up as a GS-11 when you got through. And a lot of the people in our office applied for that and went through that program and became specialists. And she applied for that and she wasn't picked. Another lady

from the office was picked, who she didn't feel was as well qualified, but who was a black lady, and my employee was white. So she filed an equal opportunity complaint, saying that she was discriminated against. And I testified in her case. And I had the figures, because we had the statistics, and I presented them. And she won her case. So she became an intern and went through that. So yeah, it worked both ways. But I think for the most part, everything was pretty fair. Most of the supervisors there and most of the military all selected people on the basis of who was the best qualified. There was rarely a time when it was based on race or religion or whatever.

RUBENS: So that wasn't such a sticking point or a bone of contention, then, amongst the staff.

SANTOS: Not really. But we did have the equal opportunity employment office there, and they were very visible. So that might've been a help, too, to make sure that everybody minded their P's and Q's.

GORDON COLEMAN

RUBENS: In 1979 you become a colonel?

COLEMAN: Yes. There were only 30 black colonels at the time in the army, navy, air force, the whole nine yards. That was it. There were four colonels at grade O6. The next step is a brigadier general. I was part of the group that's helping the ROTC, and we're all colonels and above, but I'm the only minority. I'm the only black in the place. Now, at the army base, it turns out that most of the employees there were from the local neighborhoods, were the people at the lower end of the social economic scale, so they were the janitors, and their kids are now getting educated, coming up through the system. The management, midlevel and higher, there were very few blacks, or hardly none. It began to change because the Vietnam War came through, and minority military officers were now beginning to show up—blacks would show up as majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels. With Vietnam, it changed overnight.

I got promoted by Colonel Fowler, who is a Cal grad. I was a unit commander and I used to go and do all the paperwork on my own time, and he saw me a number of times, and said, "Who are you?" He knew who I was. We got to talking. He says, "Well, what are you?" I said, "Well, I'm a major." He said, "Look. You can get a better career with me than you can where you are, because you can get to be promoted to colonel and probably end up being a commandant," which is pretty funny. In the military, you're always looking for the next assignment. If you really like it, you're looking for the next assignment to see as high as you can go. My goal always was to be an officer. My dad was a corporal. I figured, "I want to succeed Daddy." Because, remember, my father was in the segregated army. But I wanted to be an officer. So I

figured, “Well, if I get to be a major, that’s my goal.” But then Colonel Fowler says, “Hey, you can do better than that.”

Fowler says, “Come into my organization [the Army Reserves School], because here is a ladder. You can come in as a major, and go all the way up, because you will go through various jobs. This is a school. We teach people. We need instructors. And as people retire and move out there’s always vacancies. And the trick here is if you can get enough people in your class, we will keep you. It’s a paid position. They will even give us an excess, because what we need to do right now is train people, because a war’s going on! We’ve got to ramp these guys up, and our goal is to train as many people as they can to get the skills, so when they go over to ’Nam or wherever it is, they know how to do the job.”

I think I was an NCO director for one year and then I became an MOS, and after I’m an MOS director for a year, I got promoted to lieutenant colonel. Now, as a lieutenant colonel, I’m overseeing the MOS and NCO departments, and the next thing I know, I end up being the secretary for the commandant.

RUBENS: And you had been one of the only African Americans in leadership?

COLEMAN: Yeah, in a leadership role. And while I was there a Major Merritt — a black major — who came in and he had been to ’Nam. He started telling me about the black experience in the military, because he was an active army person. And he was saying, “There’s a lot of things you can do, a lot of things you can’t do.” He said, “But the bottom line is be quiet, shut your mouth, and learn everything you can, because once you get higher up the ladder and they put you in a command position, which they’re eventually going to have to, because the army’s getting bigger and bigger, you will be able to be a better commander, because you’ve done all of the scut work”—as we call it, the ash and trash stuff.

To be a colonel, you had to get command and general staff. I took those classes, I got all that out of the way, and then I’m in line for promotion, because when the vacancy occurs, they look at everybody, and see who’s the best qualified. Well, the guy who’s the best qualified is the guy who’s got all the classes done, and has different assignments, and understands the system, and has a good efficiency report, and I had good efficiency reports. So I was in line to move up through the system. I started moving through the system when the climate began to change. The military was basically run by officers from the South, because in the South, the military is a very honorable profession, and they’ve got their code of ethics, and I don’t care if I like you or not, but if you’re accepted in it, we will look out for you. Most of the people I had worked for were senior officers from the South, and that’s why they slowed down Truman’s integrating the service, because they just drug their feet, and they did it their way. War is over, Korea’s over, and a lot of people who came back were black, who had been officers or had been in the system, and they said, “Hey, I might as well stay

in this.” Because one, you get a retirement if you stay in for a period of time. It’s not the same as active duty, but you get a check at the end of the time, and you get all the benefits. So I said, “I’m going to stay in long enough to get a separate check — not an active duty check, but what I get as a reservist.”

The shift in the culture of the military. It’s now opening up to other people, other groups. More blacks are coming in, because, hey, they need bodies. When I became a colonel — a black colonel — there were only 30 black colonels in the active army and the reserves, and I happen to have been one. I was the youngest one in the group.

RUBENS: Were you starting to see more African Americans from the community working on the base, too?

COLEMAN: Yeah. They were beginning to work there, and they were getting the jobs as the warehousemen, the leadermen, and all these supervisory things as the base expands. And remember, the other thing is once you got out of the military after your tour was up, then you could get a federal job, or if you were in another place, you got extra points for being a veteran, as opposed to somebody who’d never been there.

MICHAEL THOMAS

LAGE: How did you experience race relations in the army, being an army kid?

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. Because, again, in the army you are exposed to so many cultures, you learn to accept those cultures. For example, even in Virginia Beach, where my brother was living, there was a private elementary school, and they basically broke the color barrier—what it came down to was the army 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 kid out of your school. We’re going to make your school off-limits.” So the society around such a huge military population would just be more accepting of the cultures that are on the base. That was like 1965.

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

THOMAS: It was changing. Was everyone in the military accepting? Absolutely not. Was it more accepting than what you would consider normal society? Absolutely. It’s the old saying that people can go into a foxhole as enemies and they will come out as friends! When you get into close quarters change happens—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 it’s been drilled into their head, and then all the sudden they meet somebody 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 will break that preconceived idea of what a person is just based on what they are. Again, being in the military, I think it's more likely you'll take that step. It's encouraged for you to take that step. And a lot of people will 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." 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.

GRANT DAVIS

MEEKER: During the '70s and '80s were there affirmative action guidelines? As a supervisor in charge of hiring and promotion, how did that factor into it?

DAVIS: I always believed in fairness. And in that sense, I'm sure I have some racial tendencies that are sort of latent there. They are there. And I have made a strong effort in my life to try to work through those things. Because I think everybody has some racism in them. I just do. Whether you refer to it as favoritism or whatever. When it came to affirmative action, I thought it was a good program and I thought so because, yes, I had dealt with some racism. I don't know of a single job that I did not get because of racism, though. Frankly, I can only think of one, maybe two jobs in my whole career that I applied for I didn't get. Almost every job I ever applied for I got. Do I think racism ever played a fact in any jobs I didn't get? Not really. It may have, but I never thought it did. But I had to work with people who felt that it was a problem for them. So when affirmative action came, I thought it leveled the playing field a little bit. And yet, I don't know of any job I got because I was black. So I don't know if affirmative action ever helped me at all. I don't think I was every truly helped by it, personally. But I think it helped a lot of other folks. And because I don't have blinders on, it may have helped me in that it made some job that I applied for where maybe they would have been thinking of, "Well, we don't have anybody of color here and this kid is fairly bright. Let's just get this over, do it in there." So it may have helped me in that way but I'm not aware of any. My own feeling is that I always tried to select the best person for the job. I don't remember ever selecting a black person, even in affirmative action work, over a white person because I thought the black person needed the job because he had been discriminated against. I was always able to go for the best person for the job. And I'm not a saint, but I'm a religious man and I always felt that things kind of worked themselves out. I felt that because I probably interviewed



3.2 Participants in the Supervisor Development Program at OAB, 1975. *(Courtesy of Rose Medina)*

more black people for jobs, I probably gave more jobs to black people. But I spread it around and I did that based on merit and what this person brought to the table as opposed to any one factor. And I don't remember ever, ever letting race be my determining factor, even though affirmative action was something I had to work with.

MEEKER: Is there anything that you did as a supervisor that helped diversity be a positive attribute rather than a challenge? Or were there moments in which the diversity was a challenge in which you as a supervisor were able to provide some leadership?

DAVIS: First of all, let me just say I never thought of myself as being the perfect supervisor. I never thought of myself as being above or better than anybody else. I thought some of my supervisory skills, through teaching, through learning, through some education, through trying to be open minded, made me a pretty darn good supervisor. I wasn't the smartest guy in the world, and yet I wasn't dumb. I think I applied a lot of common sense, and yet I always felt that I'm trying to do the right thing, and therefore, it's going to all work out well. In answer to your question, I don't think anybody that I ever managed, of any race or ethnicity or even gender, can ever say that Grant Davis discriminated against me because I was a woman or I was a man or I was Jewish or I was not black or because I was Spanish. I think the feeling would be, "Well, he treated me fair," and that's what I think was probably one of my better contributions. I thought it was important to do that way. Did I ever make mistakes as a manager? Heck, yes. I think there were times when I may have been too mission oriented and guided and not always think about where that person is at this point in time. I would have looked, you know, later maybe back and saying, "You know, you could have

maybe still got that done if you'd been a little more sensitive of where those people or that person may have been."

FRED GOWAN

LAGE: How were race relations in the years you were at the Oakland Army Base?

GOWAN: I think blacks and Hispanics made up pretty close to sixty percent of the workforce.

LAGE: Are we talking about the whole workforce? Contractors, civilians?

GOWAN: Yes. Well, the contractors you saw like at the pier, most of them were not black. Some were Latinos. The longshoremen were just a deuce mixture. You would see just about anything. And they had no problem with black and white working together. I had no problem with black and white working together. There were quite a few black women who were supervisors. Very smart women. A lot of them would not take any guff from a man. I loved to see that. Particularly in truck control, there was one black lady who was just a darling. But if a truck driver came in there and was giving any of her people any guff or anything like that, I mean, she would straighten him out in a heartbeat. And a couple of them were very capable of doing physical injury to anybody. Didn't make a difference man or not. They knew how to fight. And I have some lifelong friends that I made there and still see them today, and many of them have passed on. But I had, I think, a real great relationship. People would work for me that maybe wouldn't work for someone else. And not that I was any easier on them, but I guess just the way I handled situations.

As a matter of fact, my wife is black and I met her there at Oakland Army Base, There was a suite of offices that had large glass windows. And I saw this young lady in there a couple of times. And as I was single and I noticed she was looking at me and I was looking at her, I'd smile and eventually I'd nod. Finally, I just walked in there one day and said, "My name's Fred Gowan. Are you married?" Anyway, she told me she was recently divorced. And I said, "Well, would you like to maybe get a drink or something one of these days?" And she said yes. This was like 1975, I guess. And we dated on and off after that, and then we started dating in '76 pretty straight. So we ended up getting married at Oakland Army Base in the post chapel, which is probably one of the few buildings still standing there. Had a West Point lieutenant that worked for me and he was my best man. So that was the way we ended up.

LAGE: Was an interracial marriage a big thing for the army?

GOWAN: Yes. There were repercussions. The marriage created a huge rift between my father and I. But all my friends from this area, whatever I wanted to do was okay with them. Same with my sisters and brother.

LAGE: Well, that's generational, do you think?



3.3 The OAB chapel just prior to completion in 1942. (*Courtesy of Port of Oakland Archives*)

GOWAN: Yes, I think it was with my dad's case. But you know what? His father, my grandfather, was not like that. Nor are his brothers or his sisters. They were of that era.

LAGE: How about within the army? Were there any problems?

GOWAN: Yes. You didn't see it. Maybe not for NCOs. You saw a lot of NCOs that were married to Orientals. Not many were between black and white, unless they were foreign. Black men married to a French woman or a German woman. No U.S. citizens. Very few of them had done that. But I was kind of like a maverick. I just told myself, "This is my life and I'm going to lead it the way I want to." So I ran into situations later on. Some of them particularly involving senior officers. They would be very subtle. And I think that's probably what had some effect on me not getting my promotion to colonel was my marriage, because I had completed the command general staff, had a good record, good efficiency reports. I don't tell everybody that, but I kind of felt that that had something to do with it.

LAGE: Did you have more than a feeling?

GOWAN: Well, you couldn't nail it down. But we went to a receiving line down in Panama and it was my battalion that I was with, and the company was assigned to an infantry brigade. And the infantry brigade commander was from the South, as were

several of his colonels. And one of them happened to be my senior rater. So we were going through the receiving line. And, of course, it's formal. And in those days, down there, you had a mess white uniform, which is like a very chic looking tuxedo type of arrangement with a cummerbund and a waistcoat. It's just one of the highlight pictures or uniforms. And there was a guy in front of my wife who was black. And when you go through the line, the aide of the general greets you on the line and you tell him who you are and he passed it next and it goes until it gets to the general. Well, the captain gave his name and then he saw the black lady. The assumption was made that that was Mrs. whatever his name was. And then when I was introduced to the general, I said, "Major Gowan and this is my wife Carolyn." And I could see this look on his face. But I had already achieved regular army status and a lot of them were still reserve officer majors. So the next efficiency report I got, which would go before the board, was from this colonel. And I felt that he was under guidance to not select me. Although I had been the best company commander in the battalion. My battalion commander rated me number one and this guy rated me in what's known as the four block. He had fifty-one majors to rate throughout the brigade, and I was like in the four block, along with two or three other guys. If you're not in those first two blocks, you're not selected.

DAVE TONER

LAGE: Were the military police pretty diverse, racially?

TONER: Yes, they were. And we all got along really well. There was very little issues with that. There was a few people from like the Deep South or whatnot who may have been racist but didn't really let it affect their work. You'd hear them talking. When I was in Alabama I was told by some white guys that the only thing worse than a Yankee is a person of color. So there was some tension there. But Oakland was a very diverse city at that time, and there was very little problems with race relations—we all got along really well.

LAGE: So you did have women as military police?

TONER: Yeah. Very much so. In fact, in basic training and AIT, there was quite a few women who were a lot better than most of the guys. You've got to have pretty good common sense, you've got to be pretty aware, and some of the guys were not. And you needed to be a fairly aggressive personality in some aspects. And there was quite a few women who I'd rather have as a partner than most of the guys, honestly.

LAGE: And do you think the other guys felt that way, too? Did you sense tension around gender?

TONER: Not really. I was eighteen. I was pretty happy to have them around. [laughter]

JOHN COMPISI

LAGE: Now did you have a chance to observe gender relations? It sounds like more and more women were coming into positions of responsibility on both the civilian and the military side.

COMPISI: Well, certainly on the military side. But the military population shrank over time, just because there was more emphasis on putting military people in military organizations. And they kept losing that structure in MTMC, which was not a good thing, I don't think, long term. But on the military side there was some of that certainly. I think Sue Halter was as I said the garrison commander. My job in Hawaii has since had two females who've commanded it. The commander of Headquarters MTMC once removed, maybe two in a row though, were female generals. So that certainly changed in the military side.

LAGE: Did that happen just smoothly? Or were there people grumbling about these women?

COMPISI: No, I think smoothly. Since 1948, the military has been very flexible in adapting to the realities of political American life. So I think they've gone smoothly. And certainly the women who've risen to those positions have had to be very sharp to be able to get there. So I think it went smoothly, yes.

LAGE: I think it's inevitable that we're going to end up with a different policy on gays in the military at some point. Do you think that will go as smoothly?

COMPISI: Probably. I think people in the military are just a microcosm of American society. I'll show my prejudice. They're a very good microcosm because of certain constraints on who can come in in terms of certainly attitude, high school degrees, people who are motivated to do something with their lives. So it weeds out part of the American population who isn't necessarily going to contribute. Not to say that everybody in the military is a topnotch citizen. That's obviously not true. Some of the studies I've seen recently about who makes up the military—because in the political campaign there was comments that it's only the poor and the ethnic minorities are serving in the military. Not true. There are more college-educated people in the military than in the general population. More people in the military come from not affluence necessarily but from the upper middle class and above than in the general population. So that's not a truism that only the poor and the downtrodden and the minorities are serving in the military. So anyway, back to your question about the civilian workforce. There were an awful lot of civilian workforce who were women and who were moving up through promotions.

FRED GOWAN

LAGE: Were there many women working on the base?

GOWAN: There was a lot of women. A heck of a lot of women—actually on the piers. They would come down. They worked in the office on a pier. I had three and I think there was three from the contractor also. We shared a same big office. And then I had two more that worked in the west end of pier six. But down at the pier, you didn't actually see them. Now, you do. They have female marine cargo specialists. And I think it's a good thing. They've paid their dues. But I had some positions that I had women apply for and so I interviewed them first and they were generally older and they were looking for a promotion. And I applaud them for that, but I said, "You know, you're going to have to be going up and down ship's ladders to inspect this cargo when it's being put aboard and after it's been put aboard. You're going to have to wear steel-toed shoes. You're going to have to wear a hard hat and coveralls. You're going to work in the vicinity of some of the most uncouth men I've ever run across, and that would be longshoremen."

Normally, that would turn them off and they would withdraw their application. And I saw this a lot. They were taught that a man would actually do all the hard work and they wouldn't have to do it and yet they'd still get the pay. And even in the building, on my second tour there, I had this one female who was very smart. I mean, just a good woman. She was like a GS-8 and she got this opportunity for a promotion and she wasn't really qualified for it, but she was given the job and the promotion. But she would bring her work to one of my men who worked for me to write her papers for her. So I called her up short on that and went to her boss and I said, "This is not going to work. She left my section to go to your section for a promotion. You selected her. And now she can't produce the product and she comes back and wants my two guys, who can write, to write it for her." I said, "We're not going to do that anymore." We're good friends now, but at that time, she didn't like that at all.

When I came back in 1984 I ended up working in the military international traffic directorate and I had sixty-five people working for me and sixty of them were female. And we were in the international traffic, working exclusively with the ocean carriers, APL, Sea-Land, Matson, those folks like that. I hired several young ladies to come in and work, and I interviewed a lot of them from within the command that wanted to come in and learn something a little bit different, to get out of the secretary stenotype field into transportation. And, of course, there were chances for a promotion. Most of them were GS-7s and GS-8s that worked in that particular area. One of the young girls that I hired is now the main transportation officer at Beaumont, Texas. I saw her recently at a convention and she was telling all of her friends, "You know, this man was my first boss when I came to work as a civil servant."

RICH BILLUPS

BILLUPS: How's training new employees? You always used to joke with them a little bit. You can't joke anymore. Ever since the '70s, when the women's rights come into it, you got where you couldn't joke with anybody. You're scared to say anything.

MEEKER: How did that change work?

BILLUPS: Oh, it just changed everything. It changed the way that you talked to people. The whole situation of working changed. You really noticed it around here, because you had to watch your — otherwise they'd write you up, or they'd do something, they'd do something that you wouldn't like.

MEEKER: Like what? What are some of the things?

BILLUPS: I know in the latter part of the public works, we ended up down at the Hilton. Everybody had to go to a mandatory "can't talk, you say it more than one time, it's harassment." It changed everybody's way of doing things.

MEEKER: During your period in public works, were there any women doing electrical work, or carpentry, or anything like that?

BILLUPS: There were some plumbers. And there were a few electrical gals that were in there. I never really got to know any of them, because they were in the construction part of it, and I was in the maintenance.

MEEKER: Do you know anyone who was ever fired for harassment?

BILLUPS: No. They'd just give you a letter or reprimand for it. Most of the time, they'd give you a ration of talkings to, and, "Don't do that any more." I'm glad I'm to be at the end of it. I don't have to deal with it any more.

MEEKER: So, it became an extra burden?

BILLUPS: It is a burden, because you've got to watch what you say. You can't say what you normally say. It changes your whole pattern of life. It's changed.

MEEKER: Do you think of it primarily as it makes work less fun and interesting, or do you feel like you're not free to do things that you once were?

BILLUPS: Well, that has a lot to do with it. You can't say how you feel about it. You say what you feel about it, you'll end up with a letter. That's just the way it goes. It's just part of life now. They kind of compacted it so you don't know what to say anymore, so you don't say anything. You don't even walk up to people and don't even say hi to them anymore. It cuts down the closeness of the people.

MARY MYERS

MYERS: I was the deputy of the Cargo Operations Division. And I was the first woman who actually was the deputy of that division. And mostly everybody that worked in that division under me were men, whether they be civilian or military, whether they be reservists or active duty military. Everybody was called “dude”—at all levels, even colonels. I got away with a lot, because I was about the only girl. In fact, I have a coffee cup from one of the reservists, who actually made me a coffee cup that has “Dudette” on it. You’re pretty much the mommy for these guys. The military guys would come—and women—would come for like two years at a time. And they would leave their families. A lot of them came from the East Coast. So you’re their family. You know? It’s amazing.

I remember one woman at the base. She was in the intern training program and she said the guys just put her through hell and that she didn’t know she could do it. She came to talk to me one day about it, because I was already head of the division. And I said, “You know what? You just keep on keepin’ on. Because you’re going to be good at this.” Well, you know what? She paved the way. And there’s one picture of her that, whenever I think about her, I think about this: She was inside of a tank with her head popped out of the tank, with a hardhat on. And it had the caption: “the first female marine cargo specialist.” And I thought, she did it!

One thing I had to really be careful of: there was all kinds of men—all different kinds of sizes and shapes and ages. A lot of them were single and I was single too. So the number one rule for me was never get romantically involved with any of them or give the illusion that I was. So that was number one thing. I really was living in a fishbowl because I was the first woman doing this position and they were going to be very critical and very watching what I was going to do, and how was I going to react, and did I know what the heck I was doing—did I understand what a ship was and a railcar?

So they respected the fact that I respected them, that I realized that a lot of them had been doing their jobs for a very long time. And my number one priority was safety. Because right before I came to take that position there was a man who had, I think about a few weeks before he was going to retire, was literally killed by a forklift rolling over him. So it was very devastating. And so I always kept that in mind, to make sure that my guys were really practicing safety.

The Oakland Army Base as a Ladder of Economic Mobility:

In the following passages, interviewees describe the trajectory of their careers at the Oakland Army Base, with many moving from low-paying clerical jobs up through higher-paying management positions by the end of their careers. Some felt hindered because of discrimination on the basis of gender or race, but many see their careers as stories primarily of advancement.

GRANT DAVIS

DAVIS: I left the army in very early 1967. I went to a few places to look for a job and they weren't hiring, and this friend of mine decided, "Hey, let's go check at the army or navy base, or one of these military bases. We're veterans, why not?" Well, the navy wouldn't let us on the facility because we didn't have the passes. So we went down the street to the army base personnel office and they essentially accepted résumés from us and hired us on that day. And on January 11, 1967, I reported to work at the Oakland Army Base and I worked there until March 1, 1999. Just over thirty-two years. In 1999, the Oakland Army Base was BRACed. My entire career was all federal civilian employment. I was considered a civil servant, a GS employee. I stayed in my first position for less than six months because I then applied for another job that allowed me promotions—that led to other promotions.

I applied for and was selected for a position that would become interned to be a traffic management specialist—meaning that I'd be able to get promoted at intervals without further competition. Considered a good thing. You know, it was like some of the internships you hear about today. It's like you're selected for the intern, so if you go through that and you get the training you need, you'll be promoted without further having to compete for the jobs. I think July of '74 I was selected to go into the intern position.

MEEKER: And this is work that you continued to do throughout the rest of your career, then?

DAVIS: It was, except, you know, as a result of that, I was promoted and then, of course, I was then able to compete for other jobs that allowed me to get promoted. And most of that involved eventually supervising people. So I was definitely management.

MEEKER: Did you develop your own style of supervising employees?

DAVIS: Oh, absolutely. You know, I was a pretty darn good manager. Before I got into management I served as a union representative and I learned a lot there because I always believed in the rights of people and they should be treated fairly by management, and didn't feel like management should take advantage of the workers. They

should always be respected and you should always do what you can to help the workers to succeed. And so when I got into the management side of the world, I took some of those same skills, I felt, which helped me to be a better manager, because I still was concerned about the welfare of my people. I once had a manager, supervisor, who once said to me, "Grant, if you never do anything else, make sure you get your people paid for the work they done." That always stayed in my mind. The other part of that, I thought, was, "Also treat them the way you'd want to be treated. You saw some poor managers while you were coming up. Don't be like them." By the same token, I felt that I was mission oriented, you know, from my military days. I always felt like it was important that you get the job done. And so I was hopefully able to combine my union skills with my managerial skills to do the very best job that I knew how to do. And that was treating people the way I wanted to be treated, encouraging them, monitoring their performance, documenting their good stuff, their positives, correcting them when necessary, when there were shortcomings, and realizing I could only be as good as they are. And so it was important to me to work with people to get the best out of them, which in turn, made me look good.

MEEKER: Well, in hindsight, what are some of the things that you would have considered to be some of your most memorable accomplishments?

DAVIS: Education was always important to me and I encouraged my people, "Get as much education as you can." You can't go wrong and you can use it in any way, shape, or form. And that'll often get you a leg up. And yet, when I was selecting someone for a position, I would learn not to use any one criteria as being the one major reason for selecting them for a position. In other words, if you had the education, and yet you didn't work well with people, it could affect you. Or if you were just a social animal and you didn't have quite as much education, that would not necessarily determine whether you got the job working for me, or promoted. I'd like someone more well-rounded.

GEORGE BOLTON

RUBENS: How about friends you went to high school with in West Oakland? Did people get jobs on the base?

BOLTON: The naval supply, naval air base, and the Oakland Army Base were points of entry to let's say the job market or the working market, for many, many people that came out of high school. They would come out of high school, not only McClymonds but Tech or Fremont, Oakland High. It was a place that you went. That's where literally, you would get your first kind of a job.

RUBENS: What kind of jobs? Did you know people who were hired?

BOLTON: Oh if you worked down there you could be either a materials handler down there, you could be a driver if you really got that far, where you would drive trucks for them, or you would work there as not a laborer necessarily, but because it was a supply depot, then you had a lot of materials going around and you had people that worked down there. That's what you would up doing, in supply, moving and handling supplies.

RUBENS: Did they recruit or was there an employment office and you went down there?

BOLTON: There was an employment office, just like the post office, same thing. When you got out of high school, it was one of the first things you did, is you got a job. And when you got a job, one of the places that you would be able to do it is you would be able to go there, to the naval supply or army base, post office, all of those places you would go to and by getting a job there right out of school, and there are still some people that I know that have left there, that are still around here, that went to work eighteen, nineteen years old, that worked there until the base closed and then ultimately they wound up someplace else. But that's what you did and that's what, in great measure I think, caused the building and the development of Fremont and some of the other places, because after you got a stable job, you were able to get yourself some money together to buy yourself a house, and that was like moving up, is that you moved not necessarily out of Oakland, but into a newer community and you got a job. You learned something. Everybody didn't go to some college or university. I mean, you would go to what was called a trade school at the time but that was it, and you came out of high school and that's what you were expected to do, and it happened for a lot of people here.

JANICE McDONALD

McDONALD: I was going to junior college at Merritt. One day my friends that went to Merritt College and I went to the placement office there for jobs and they were starting to hire a lot of people for the Oakland Army Base. I said, "Hey, I want a job, too!" [laughter] So that's how I started my life there.

LI: And was the pay pretty good?

McDONALD: No! [laughter] I started in 1965 at the age of 18 as a GS-1 and I was temporary, so my pay was \$1.69 an hour, but I thought that was a lot of money because when I was working at an insurance company I was only getting \$1 an hour, so it was a big jump for me!

When I first got my job there all my friends worked in another building, Building 1, and I was kind of disappointed because I thought, well, I don't want to work alone by myself in a different section! When I first started there it was a whole

new concept for me, because I had never really worked in a big office, and there were a lot of military. I was a clerk typist, and had I not known how to type in college I probably would have been really slow at it, because all I did was type military personnel names, social security numbers, and their addresses because these were the guys that were going overseas to Vietnam. I had to track the emergency data information, and so I did that for four hours a day from 5:00-9:00 p.m. because I was going to school. I eventually converted to full-time, so I got a GS-2!

LI: So then did you finish school?

McDONALD: No, I didn't because I had a job already. I guess the money was getting better and they gave me more responsibilities. I started to apply for higher paying jobs, so then I kind of moved on, and at one point I went to work for Social Security with Berkeley Teleservice, and I was on the telephones and answering general questions and stuff, so I stayed with Social Security about five years, and then I felt I wanted to go back to the army base. So at that time I went back to work at Pier 7 in 1980.

LI: So you missed working on the base?

McDONALD: Yeah, I did. I did. I missed all my friends. It was kind of hard to wean away, because I would go visit them all the time, and I said, "If there's any jobs open, let me know!" So then I ended up at the pier, but the pier was a nice place to work because everybody was like a family, and then there were the ships there that came through, and it was break-bulk cargo, so they had Ro-Ro vessels, and basically I guess they would ship all these tanks and all the army equipment. So I learned a lot about just equipment itself, because eventually I got a job in special commodity, so I got to learn about equipments and ammunition and so forth. But basically we kind of shadow somebody, too, and you get on the job training. When I left there I was a GS-9.

ROSE MEDINA

MEDINA: I started work at the base on November 11, 1968. My name was Rose Johnson at the time. I was married, and I had a little baby that was eleven weeks old, and when I started I was only supposed to work for a few months. It was just going to be temporary.

RUBENS: How had you found the job?

MEDINA: My father-in-law had been in the military, and he had gone through the Oakland Army Base. When I moved up here from San Diego in 1968, I told him, "I think I need to find a job for a couple months," and he said, "Why don't you go to the army base," and I said, "I don't even know where it is." And that's how I landed over there, and I applied for a temporary job.

RUBENS: What was your first job?

MEDINA: I was a clerk typist, GS-4. I worked in Documentation Division. But I ended up as a GS-12 in 1996 after working twenty-eight years at the Oakland Army Base. When I started working with cargo, it was very dry. And my boss, Maki Nakaji, said, "You don't seem very enthused." And I said, "Well, you know, when you work in research with doctors and then you come here and you move cargo, it doesn't sound exciting." And, so, she said, "Well, I'm going to make it exciting." And, so, the first thing she did was she arranged a tour for all the new employees at the army base, and we boarded one of the ships. They showed us how things are loaded and then she explained the importance of providing our military with everything that they need to survive overseas. And, so, over the years it became very exciting.

RUBENS: Would you say that the army base really did afford a certain kind of mobility for other people as well?

MEDINA: Yes. It gave you a comfortable living. I raised my children while I worked there, and a lot of other families did, too. Working for the federal government, a lot of times, I had people say to me, "Why don't you come and work over here? We'll pay you more." And it's true, we did not get paid as much as people on the outside would get paid for the same job, but we were federal service. And, in fact, when I was working in procurement, some of the ladies from purchasing went to work for outside companies, and they would call us and tell us, "Ooh, I'm making ten dollars more than you are," or whatever. And it was true. We never got what the private industry got, but, I don't know. I stayed because it was my job, I enjoyed it, and I got personal gratification from knowing that I'm helping the troops.

RUBENS: Well you also got an education. When did that start?

MEDINA: In 1983 I applied for a position in the old contracting section again. In those days, it changed from procurement to acquisition. My boss, again, was Mr. Kang. And there was a program called the upward mobility position program where you could apply for these jobs, and you didn't have to have a college degree, and you could go up to a certain level, if you went to the different schools that they sent you. So that's what I applied for, that's what I got though the army. Yes. And what happened was my first class was a contract law class at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

RUBENS: How long were those?

MEDINA: That was two weeks. And they are very compacted. Instead of going a semester, they jam it all in two weeks. The way the government works is they'll pay for all this, you take your test, you pass, you get a certificate. If you don't pass, then you have a year to take it via correspondence, and if you don't pass that, then it comes out of your check. Uncle Sam always gets his money. So, I took all the classes that I needed to be able to move up and become a contracting officer and get a warrant. And that was a big deal in those days because we didn't have a lot of women who were contracting

officers. I ended up being a contracting officer with a warrant for up to \$5 million—there are only certain people that could spend money for the government, and they're called contracting officers. And to be a contracting officer, you have to have a certain amount of experience and classes, certain classes. They also give you a warrant, which is your permission to spend government money and sign contracts up to a certain monetary level. And then someone with a higher position will get a higher level. Mine was \$5 million, so that was good.

LEA VIVIAN WALTON

WALTON: I decided that I wanted to be a rodeo queen, and in order to be a rodeo queen you had to participate in a lot of the different events in a rodeo. I ended up with the barrel racing where there are three barrels and you really make a circle eight, in effect, and you're going against the clock. So my dad, when I asked him if I could do this, he said, "Sure." Then dad gave me a pickup and a trailer and said, "Go at it. You're on your own." Oh my goodness! I did win the rodeo queen when I was seventeen. So that's how I grew up. I went to several different colleges but college life wasn't for me. I ended up at a business college in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And then in 1965, I told my family, "I'm going to California." Daddy says, "What are you going to do there?" And I said, "Well, I want to get into the real world, you know?" My dad promised me, "If you'll stay and cook for me, I'll give you \$300 a month and a new Mustang." Well, I wanted that 1965 Mustang so bad, but not bad enough to stay. I came to California.

So in 1965, I packed up my bags. Fortunately, I had some wonderful friends that lived in Stockton, California, and I went to live with them. And I finally got a job, and that was with the Defense Depot in Tracy, and I started there as a GS-4, secretary to the transportation officer. I was at Tracy from '65 to '69. And my late husband was in transportation as a consultant for the commercial side. And he told me, "You know what? If you really want to get ahead, you need to go to college and get your transportation degree." So lo and behold, there was an opening that became available at Oakland Army Base, in October of '69, and I went there as a GS-7. So I went from my five to my seven. And while I was there, I met the most wonderful person. Her name was Laura Tom, she was our director for transportation, and she took me under her wing and she taught me everything from A to Z. I mean, she was a marvelous mentor because she was so highly respected by the military, the civilians, and the commercial carrier industry that we relied upon for the transportation services. I was at MOTBA for about four years. And then an opening came open for a promotion in the Military Traffic Management Command. That's what we called upstairs. We were both on the second floor, but if you got to go to work for the headquarters, then you were more important, you know? So I took that job as a GS-9.

LI: So did you ever go back to school then, as your husband suggested?

WALTON: Yes, I went to night school three nights a week for five years to get my degree in transportation. So from there, I was at MTMC for, let's see, about 1975 until—I kept trying to get my GS-11. That was my goal. I had set that goal when I was a GS-4—

LI: What was it about GS-11 that seemed like the magic?

WALTON: I don't know. I guess at Defense Depot Tracy, the GS-11's were in the management field, and I just decided I was going to be a leader and not a follower. And so that was my goal. I kept trying and trying. I got my GS-10 at MTMC. I kept applying for GS-11's, and of course the competition is very stiff. And keep in mind, I'm not being antichauvinist, but in the days that I was in government service, transportation field was a man's world, there weren't any women in management except for my wonderful mentor, Laura Tom. The women were in clerical positions, and that's where they stayed. So it was tough competition, but I finally got my GS-11 by going back to Defense Depot Tracy.

LI: Do you think it made your job challenging, being a woman in that position at that time?

WALTON: It was terrible. [laughter] It was very, very challenging. One advantage that I had was that I had a boss who told me, "Lea, there's something you have to remember: Be sure that you earn and gain the respect of your peers and your subordinates as well as the head of the departments." He says, "This isn't a popularity contest. They don't have to like you. But if they respect you, you can go as far as you want to." And I just kept that in mind. So, yeah, there's lots of times in those days with prejudice of women. I guess the worst part was I had to work ten times harder to prove myself, you know? If it took seven days a week to do something, I worked that seven days. But if you can prove yourself worthy without any pointing and playing the woman role, then they respect you. Everyone respects you, both women and men.

LI: Was it difficult to move up from the GS-4 through the GS-10, or were those easier moves to make versus going up toward management, GS-11 and beyond?

WALTON: I think it was from a GS-4 to a GS-10, from sixty-five to about eighty-one, each step at a time, that's how long it took me. And then I was at eleven for two years. I went back to MTMC, where they had a twelve opening, and I was selected for that. At that time, Laura Tom had moved over to MTMC, and she was again my director. And I learned so much from her in those days. I was a twelve for only a couple of years. When Laura retired, I was selected to be the director, and that was the crowning moment of my life, you know? To be able to succeed her when I was a person that knew her as a GS-7, and she had followed my career and given me such wonderful

advice all those years. So it was in 1983 that I received the thirteen, and it was 1996 before I got my fourteen. So I can tell you, it was a long time.

LI: Did you see yourself at the time as a trailblazer? I mean, the feminist movement was going on and did you see yourself as part of that moment?

WALTON: The women's movement? No. [laughter] To be perfectly honest with you, I didn't want to be a feminist. My goals were to be the best I could in what I was doing, irrespective of whether I was a female or not. I didn't want any special treatment, I didn't. To me, I saw the feminist movement as out there beating the drum and, you know, "We need this, you've got to give us this!" And I wouldn't follow that.

LI: I mean, it must have been an interesting time though, because I'm sure that people probably look at your career accomplishments and want to place you in that movement, you know?

WALTON: Yes, yes. I challenged it very much; in fact, one day that comes to mind. It was, goodness, in the middle '90s, and I was at GSA and we had what they called town-hall meetings where all of their dignitaries and heads of staff would come in from Washington D.C., gather all the employees together, and give them a pep talk. And at one of these conferences, my director introduced me to a director that was really his boss from Washington D.C. and he said, "Mr. so and so, I want you to meet Lea Duval." And the guy looks at me and he says, "You're Lea?" And I said, "Yes sir." He said, "I've heard so much about you. I thought you were a man." And I was flabbergasted. How dare you! I spell my name L-E-A. You think a man's going to, spell his name that way? I was insulted. So just before the meeting, myself and one of my associates were sitting at the head table and I whispered in Delia's ear that this jerk had thought that I was a man when he heard the name Lea. And Delia—she was such a wonderful girl—looks at me and she said, "Well, Lea, that's because you're the only one here with balls." [laughter]

SYDNEY SANTOS

RUBENS: How did you know that the base was hiring and how did you get the job?

SANTOS: I took the civil service exam probably in 1965. And I got called to work in January 1966. I was nineteen years old. I'd graduated high school when I was seventeen. But I was married and had my son when I was eighteen. And of course, by the time I was nineteen, we were already split up. [laughs] So needless to say, I had to go look for a job. My mother worked for the government, so she said, "Take the civil service test." So that's what I did, and got hired. I started out as a GS-2 clerk typist.

RUBENS: In what department?

SANTOS: It just was the luck of the Irish; I started out in civilian personnel. And that's where I remained, and worked my way up.

RUBENS: Why don't you tell us what you did in the beginning. What was the work like? Who did you work for?

SANTOS: Well, I couldn't believe it. Looking back now, I'm thinking what a nerve I had. The lady that interviewed me was telling me about the job, and I said, "Well, I certainly hope there's not too much filing because I don't like filing." Now, here I'm trying to get a job and I'm telling her I don't want to do filing! [laughs] I think back now, boy, what an idiot. But they hired me anyway. And I started out just, like I said, as a GS-2 clerk typist, and filing in the personnel folders, the official personnel folders, and typing and answering the phones. Actually, at that time, I think it was called records and reports. And I was employed by the Military Traffic Management Command and I stayed there for twenty years. I started out doing the clerical duties and part of my assignment was to file the personnel regulations when they came in. So of course, I loved to read, so I had to read them all as I was filing them which served me very well because as time went on, I became quite a regulatory expert. I knew where everything was, so people started coming to me and asking me, well, where do you find this? Or what's the rule on this? And as I made my way through the ranks and moved my way up, I was pretty quick on the regulations, and that helped me a lot. So that simple little task that they assigned me served me very well. I ended up as a GS-12 supervisory personnel management specialist, before I left. And I could've gone higher. [laughs]

RUBENS: The army bases seemed to be a great place that provided upward mobility.

SANTOS: Oh, absolutely! It was wonderful. It was wonderful for a woman or a minority, that was the place to be, the government. I'm not saying just the army base, but the government as a whole—where you could go become higher grades through your experience. They trained you and you got the experience. And so you could advance. If you went out to private sector and were in the same situation that I was you would never have made the specialist grade because there would've been a requirement that you have a college degree. But the government and the army, they would count the years of experience. It would take you a long time, but that experience was just as good as the degree. So yeah, it was absolutely a perfect, marvelous opportunity. I never would've gotten to where I was, probably, if it hadn't been for the government and the army.

MARY MYERS

MYERS: I'm sure that everything we do in our lives affect where we go next. Like they say, the universe is always working in our favor. And so it was really weird how I ended up at the army because I didn't have any intention of working for the army. I was a single parent, desperately trying to get my first AA degree in transportation. Because the Port of Oakland actually provided that for us for free because they were desperate for transportation-savvy individuals, whether they be male or female. There was a huge shortage. And so they provided the thirty units that you needed for a degree in logistics, transportation logistics, for free. They had some of the classes at the Port and then they also had them at Oakland Army Base—the Port of Oakland and Oakland Army Base worked together.

LAGE: Was it overseen by an established college?

MYERS: Yeah. You actually got your degree from the College of Alameda. That was, I think, 1986 or something. I have the degree hanging on the wall back there.

And so that really got me started. And so I think, well, now I've got this degree, now what do I do? So somebody said, "You should go work for Military Traffic Management Command." And I thought, okay, I'll check it out. But they weren't going to hire me. So instead I got a job as a secretary at the navy base, even though I had this education. But I got my foot in the door. And so I worked there for about six months and the navy commander said, "Why are you here? You need to be over at Oakland Army Base!" And I go, "Yeah, I know but they won't hire me." And I'm a single mom, trying to put food on the table for my kids, because I wasn't getting child support. So I'm a desperate woman, here, trying to get my career going. So he goes, "Let's see what we can do" and he wrote a special letter.

I got my first job in transportation as a shipment clerk, GS-5. I started as a GS-4 secretary in the navy and then went over there as a GS-5. And then just started working my way up, very quickly. In fact, my resume would show I would be working for six months in one job, six weeks in another job. As soon as I got a job, I would start looking for my next potential job that was going to keep pushing me up. And I was able to get to GS-12 within eight years, from a GS-4.