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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Gordon Coleman:  
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Lisa Rubens  
in 2007

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Interview #1: April 6, 2007  
[Audio File 1]

01-00:00:23

Coleman: I'm Gordon Coleman. I was born in Oakland, California. Eighth of September, 1931.

01-00:00:29

Rubens: Now, Mr. Coleman, I want to thank you so much for being here today. What we are beginning, and today is Thursday, April 6, 2007. And you're here in my office, the Oral History office. And we're here, and I met you regarding to talk about your work at the Oakland army base. But, fortunately for us, it turns out that you have a very deep history in California. A deep history with the University of California and with Oakland, particularly your work, community service, family. And I think if we begin, let me just do a very thin line, your family background through Cal to the Army base. Then, another time we'll back up and layer it. So, you're born in Oakland, and where in Oakland, literally?

01-00:01:26

Coleman: OK. I was born in Oakland, California on 37th Street. And that was the beginning of the X-Entry to the Bay Bridge. It was right off of Market and MacArthur and 37th. MacArthur Boulevard, in those days, was 38th Street, because they changed the name during the war. And my grandfather lived across the street at 867 and I was born at 866. And I've got birth certificates and all that to prove that stuff.

01-00:02:00

Rubens: Your grandfather --

01-00:02:01

Coleman: My grandfather was Dr. Gordon C. Coleman.

01-00:02:05

Rubens: So this was your father's father?

01-00:02:08

Coleman: My father's father. Now, my grandfather and my father were born in Scottsburg, Virginia. So was my mother. In fact, the family lived within three to five miles of each other. My grandfather went to Richmond Theological Seminary -- I forgot the name of the place.

01-00:02:33

Rubens: We can always add this information.

01-00:02:34

Coleman: Yeah. In fact, I can dig it up for you because I've got the name of it. But he had a degree in divinity back in the, oh, I guess 1800s. And then got a doctorate later in 1905 from Negro Baptist College and Seguin, Texas.

01-00:02:47

Rubens: In Virginia?

01-00:02:48

Coleman: From Virginia. He traveled and went through all of Virginia. Had pastorships -- he was an ordained minister -- pastorships in a number of churches. Ended up in Pennsylvania and about 1910 or 19 -- I'm not sure of the exact dates but it was the early 1900s -- he came to California to work for the American Baptist Association. And he came to North Oakland Baptist Church, which is still there on 32nd and Linden Street in Oakland, California. It had a small congregation. He built it up.

01-00:03:26

Rubens: He was married at the time?

01-00:03:28

Coleman: Yeah, my grandfather was married. In fact, my grandfather's interesting. He had three families. He had my father was his first child, Kyster, which is an interesting story. I'll tell you about that one of these days. The second family -  
-

01-00:03:43

Rubens: Kyster, meaning?

01-00:03:44

Coleman: Kyster, K-Y-S-T-E-R.

01-00:03:45

Rubens: That was the name of your father?

01-00:03:46

Coleman: My father. Kyster Barksdale Coleman. And that relates back to my great-great-grandfather who fought in the Civil War. So there's another story (laughs).

01-00:03:53

Rubens: So we'll pick that up another time.

01-00:03:56

Coleman: And then he had a second family of relatives who were born here called Sam, John, and Julia.

01-00:04:02

Rubens: Different wife?

01-00:04:03

Coleman: Different wife (laughs). And then his last wife, the grandmother I knew, was called Ruth. So he came here, set up his church, and built the biggest black Baptist church in the Bay Area. He had a disagreement with the Northern California Baptist Association, which was run by whites. At that time of the year, or the century, they owned the deeds to churches, they paid the salaries.

The deed to the church, the property, and the salaries. My grandfather says, wait a minute, something's wrong. Why do I have to have this organization owning my property? And they tell me what I can preach in church. And he says, no, no, no, no. So he broke away from them and formed the St. John Baptist Association. About this time, my father, who had been in World War One, had spent some time in France, had come to California.

01-00:05:02

Rubens: Had returned to California?

01-00:05:04

Coleman: No, first time.

01-00:05:05

Rubens: He was born in Virginia?

01-00:05:06

Coleman: My father was born in Virginia just like my grandfather was and my mother was. He came to California to be with his father. And he was then ordained a minister by my father and became a missionary.

01-00:05:21

Rubens: About how old was he?

01-00:05:22

Coleman: He was in his 30s.

01-00:05:23

Rubens: That old?

01-00:05:24

Coleman: Yeah. My father was -- he married my mother in, let me think, I had it somewhere here.

01-00:05:36

Rubens: That's all right.

01-00:05:38

Coleman: Oh, they got married in '27.

01-00:05:40

Rubens: Oh, way after the war?

01-00:05:41

Coleman: October '27, yeah.

01-00:05:43

Rubens: So he's in the war, goes back to Virginia?

01-00:05:45

Coleman: He goes back to Virginia and then comes to California to be with his father.

01-00:05:50  
Rubens: After he marries?

01-00:05:51  
Coleman: No.

01-00:05:51  
Rubens: No?

01-00:05:52  
Coleman: He comes here, sets up.

01-00:05:53  
Rubens: Got it.

01-00:05:54  
Coleman: And then he goes and gets my mother. Goes back to Virginia and gets my mother to come out here. And they were married in '27.

01-00:06:02  
Rubens: Two years before the Depression.

01-00:06:04  
Coleman: Two years before the Depression.

01-00:06:06  
Rubens: And three years before you were born (laughs).

01-00:06:07  
Coleman: Yeah. The interesting thing is, my father, in World War One, was in the Pioneer Infantry Regiment, which was a black unit. They were the forerunners of the Navy Seabee and Army combat engineers. So he learned trades, all kinds of things. He came out here and worked for the Southern Pacific railroad fixing the electrical systems on the trains. And that was in Richmond. I'm digressing. Anyway, he came out to help my grandfather --

01-00:06:42  
Rubens: With his ministry.

01-00:06:42  
Coleman: With his ministry. And my father was a minister and he used to go down to the central valley and had a couple of small churches. He was kind of like a circuit rider. Every other Sunday he would go to a different church. But then he would always come back to North Oakland Baptist Church. There, they built a large congregation. It became the largest congregation, black congregation in Oakland. They even started churches in Richmond, Vallejo, Orville, all through northern California.

01-00:07:11  
Rubens: Let's make sure I have the exact name of the largest church that he built.



01-00:07:15  
Coleman: Yeah, OK. North Oakland Baptist Church on 32nd and Linden.

01-00:07:19  
Rubens: OK.

01-00:07:20  
Coleman: That's North Oakland Baptist Church.

01-00:07:21  
Rubens: And when does the name St. John's come in?

01-00:07:23  
Coleman: St. John's came in -- I'll give you the dates on that because I've got this stuff at home.

01-00:07:25  
Rubens: OK. Fine. Yeah.

01-00:07:27  
Coleman: That came in later on because my grandfather said, well, wait a minute.

01-00:07:31  
Rubens: Oh, that's after the breakaway? OK.

01-00:07:32  
Coleman: Yeah. He broke with them because they kept saying, you can't do that. He said, no, no, no, no.

01-00:07:36  
Rubens: Roughly, what era is it? Is it in the 30s?

01-00:07:39  
Coleman: Oh, this is in the 30s, yeah.

01-00:07:41  
Rubens: That the break happens?

01-00:07:42  
Coleman: Yeah. The break happened even before then because when I was born, they were beginning to pull away. Because I've got a history, some sketches --

01-00:07:52  
Rubens: Let me just ask you, also, where are you in the birth order of this third family?

01-00:07:57  
Coleman: OK. I was the second -- oh, and the --

01-00:08:00  
Rubens: Just of your own mother and -- your mother's name is?

01-00:08:02  
Coleman: Katherine, Katherine Anne Bailey Coleman.

01-00:08:06  
Rubens: And then she had --

01-00:08:08  
Coleman: And I had a brother name Kyster who was born two years before I was.

01-00:08:11  
Rubens: OK.

01-00:08:12  
Coleman: And then I was born in '31.

01-00:08:15  
Rubens: OK. And did anyone else come along?

01-00:08:16  
Coleman: No, we're just the two of us.

01-00:08:18  
Rubens: OK. And where did you live when you were born?

01-00:08:20  
Coleman: We lived -- well my brother was born, same place (laughs). 866 37th Street.

01-00:08:26  
Rubens: Now your point to me earlier was --

01-00:08:28  
Coleman: This community was a mixed community. In fact, my grandfather, my family, and a family down the street were the only blacks on the block. And around the area it was mixed with Irish, Italians, German, and Japanese. So I went to Longfellow School, which was only two blocks from me because it was on Apgar and Market. And when they built the bridge approach, it ran a block from our house because you see the traffic. We bought, my parents bought the house from the Crows, Anna and J.H. No. It was a German couple, I forgot their names but (inaudible).

01-00:09:23  
Rubens: A white couple?

01-00:09:24  
Coleman: Yeah, it was a white couple. And they were German. And my father bought the house from them. And we had a big barn, a big two-story barn for horses, carriages to go in and out. The house was a four-bedroom house. It was a 12-room home, two-story, that my father bought. And since he had worked in the military doing stuff, he rewired the stuff and did all that sort of stuff.

01-00:09:49  
Rubens: So, I was going to say, it was wired and plumbed and...

01-00:09:51  
Coleman:

There was already plumb but he rewired a lot of stuff. He had new hardwood floors put in. Well, the story goes -- not the story goes, my life goes -- as a kid, we had a chore in the family that every Saturday morning we had to go see grandpa, who lived across the street, and do a chore for him. And the reason we wanted to do a chore is because if we did the chore, we got an candy sucker. And in those days an all-day sucker really would last all day. And, if things worked out, you'd maybe get a penny or something less. Well, my brother and I would always fight and I would always -- I normally would beat him over there and after a while he just quit going. I would go over to see grandpa in the morning, and the chore was one, I had to go down to the corner grocery store and buy a newspaper. In those days, they had a newspaper printed, a noon edition. Because my grandfather read. He was a, well, an educated man. He read all the time.

01-00:10:48  
Rubens:

And was this the Oakland Tribune?

01-00:10:51  
Coleman:

It was the Oakland Tribune and the Post Inquire.

01-00:10:53  
Rubens:

And the Post Inquire?

01-00:10:53  
Coleman:

The Post Inquire. And I had to get that. And my father always wanted a pickle. So I would go buy him a pickle when he gave me a nickel or whatever it was to go buy a pickle, and bring the newspaper back and the pickles back. Then I had to polish my grandfather's shoes. He had those high-button shoes with the laces. And it was just the front and I had a little shinebox and put a little wax on it. But what happened is, every Saturday, because he had the largest church, all the politicians in town would come by to talk to my grandfather. Because my grandfather got involved in everything. He was instrumental in getting the first black fireman hired in the city. All of the elected officials, the mayor, the chief of police, the district attorney would come by to see grandpa. And what he would do was sit there and hold court, if you would, and say well I need this or that. And of course, what they wanted was his vote. Because he --

01-00:11:59  
Rubens:

Influenced.

01-00:12:00  
Coleman:

He influenced our church plus the rest of the community because people always would go to my grandpa for advice. Well, one of the guys who used to come in was the district attorney. And the district attorney's name was Earl Warren. And as a kid, after I would bring the paper in I would shine grandpa's shoes. I would then sit in the corner.

01-00:12:22

Rubens: You're six, seven, eight?

01-00:12:26

Coleman:

Yeah, six, seven, eight. About, yeah. Just about that time. And, when they would come in and they'd talk, and then I would always shine the shoes. I would offer, and being smart politicians, they said if I want to get to this guy I'd better get through to the kids, so I would put a little wax on it and buff it up. And they would always give me a nickel, which was big money in those days (laughs), as opposed to the penny I got and the all-day sucker from grandpa. And, I would sit in the corner and hear the thing, and then when these people would leave, my father would come in and grandpa would come in and talk about what they had cut out. And then they would turn to me and say, what did you hear, son? Now, in those days, children were seen and not heard. You didn't say a word around adults as a kid. You just sat there and played your games or whatever it was. And I would sometimes say, well he said such and such. Oh yeah, OK. And then I'd go play. Well, this went on for a while. And then when I was in high school, yeah, at high school at Tech in the 40s, Earl Warren was the governor of California. And I ended up being the representative for Oakland Technical High School, three of us. The football player, myself, and another guy, an Italian fellow. And when we went to Boy State -- Boy State was a thing run by the YMCA -- I was the only, no there was a kid from San Francisco, a black kid named Edwin Johnson, and a kid from southern California. There were only three black kids in this whole thing, Boy State. We all got to get to see, had an audience with the governor. And my county, which was Burnett, it was a mythical county. I went to go in to see the place, I walked in there, and he stopped and says, Gordon Coleman, how are you? How's your grandpa? And I was just (laughs). Governor, he's fine, so on, so on, so on. And everybody says, you know the governor? Well, yeah, I know this guy. I used to shine his shoes (laughs). He became a Supreme Court Justice and I remember going back -- I was in grad school at Howard in the '60s, Kennedy was the president -- and his daughter, Nina -- we called her Honeybear -- she married one of the, and I'm blanking on the name.

01-00:15:05

Rubens: Whose daughter?

01-00:15:06

Coleman:

Warren's daughter. And I remember seeing this and telling my classmates that I know the family (laughs). But I never saw them then because she married a guy who was a news commentator. And I was going to Howard University and the baseball stadium was right around the other side of the campus. But that was my story of Earl Warren. And I figured, you know, I remember him very clearly. He was a very fair man. And I've said to a lot of people, the best years I remember in my life was under the administration of the Warren administration because the guy was reasonably fair. There were a lot of problems going on. My grandfather and another gentleman named John Drake, who was a minister at the church, went to Warren and the Ku Klux

Klan wanted to march up and down San Pablo Avenue. And my grandfather stopped them. He went to Warren and the people and says, hey --

01-00:16:01

Rubens: When Warren is a governor?

01-00:16:02

Coleman: No, he was the district attorney. And they moved out to the town of San Pablo and had their big parade.

01-00:16:08

Rubens: I was thinking, yeah, I know that they did it in San Pablo and Richmond.

01-00:16:11

Coleman: Yeah, but they wanted to do it Oakland and my grandfather stopped them. But I remember hearing my parents talk, and even grandpa talking, when people, the black community would get in trouble, commit crimes and go to San Quentin or whatever, my grandfather would intercede before the trial was over and say, well he's a good man or he's not bad and so and so, and cut some deals. Because in a lot of cases, what it was was, it was racial prejudice that caused this thing in the first place.

01-00:16:43

Rubens: Let me ask you just a little on that and then we'll come back and layer. You live in largely a white community.

01-00:16:50

Coleman: That's right.

01-00:16:50

Rubens: You go to Tech. How integrated is Tech?

01-00:16:54

Coleman: Yeah, well now, let me finish. In Longfellow School, I ended up as the student body president in fifth grade. Fifth grade? Yeah. Sixth is junior high. I end up the class president. Then I get to Tech, I mean Hoover Junior High, I end up student body president. And then when I went to Tech, I ran for student body president and was defeated by Al Delucchi who was a judge. And Al Delucchi and I became -- well, again, part of the community was Italian too. And Delucchi's father used to come by and collect -- he worked for the scavenger company, he was our garbage person -- he came by and collected the money. We used to pay him quarters and nickels and dimes or whatever it is. Anyway, the community was primarily white, European white, and some Japanese. At Longfellow it was, let's see, in '37 -- I guess I was in the fourth grade, third or fourth grade -- they were building the Bay Bridge because they finished the Bay Bridge in '37, both bridges, Golden Gate and the San Francisco Bay Bridge -- one classmate's father got killed on the bridge. He was an ironworker, an Italian fellow. Because Carla and I were in the class of -- I've even got, I found some old photographs of me as kids. And my first girlfriend was an Irish girl. And she lived around the corner from us. And the families,

we all got along. People -- now, there were a couple of German families in the neighborhood that we didn't -- we'd just nod. But you didn't play in their yards, you didn't go back and forth. My mother and father, during the Depression, my mother used to bake rolls. They would go down and, this is again, from (inaudible) these guys, some of the surplus stuff. My mother would bake rolls and then she would go down through the neighborhood and give the rolls to the other people. And, the Italian people would give us zucchini, squash, and my dad was in working at the Southern Pacific out in Richmond, so we would travel out there and we would exchange goods back and forth. It was a barter system. And we seemed to got along. At least, I was unaware if there were big issues. But I didn't know at the time, we could not go in the Zombie Village. You couldn't go in Trader Vic's. They wouldn't cater to the blacks. There were places downtown that they would not cater to you. And I was unaware of this.

01-00:19:57

Rubens:

So your family raised you to be proud. Were they (inaudible).

01-00:20:04

Coleman:

My family said, when I was in kindergarten, you are going to college. What's that? Grandpa is a doctor of divinity. Your uncle, John, is a medical physician. Your uncle Sam is a mortician is such and such. And daddy never got to university because he was in the service, in the war -- because he was the oldest of all of the males on my grandfather's three families. He was the oldest male. And, he was self-educated. And every book I've got home, how to do math, English, all sort of stuff. He'd pull the books out and we'd read it. On Sunday after church, we would come home and have a quiet time. My mother and father would read and my brother and I would play games on the floor. Or my father would tell us stories. On Sunday afternoon, all the kids in the neighborhood would come to the church, and my father would take us downstairs to Sunday school -- what was it called -- it was young people's union (inaudible). And he would tell us stories of the Iliads. He went back and went through mythology because he was an educated man. He would read the stuff. And he said to us, and I've heard this over and over again, son, if you learn how to read you can educate yourself. You don't need a college professor to teach you. Pick up the book and read it.

01-00:21:35

Rubens:

So while he was a race man, while he advocated and pushed for representation and interference, he wasn't an angry man or a bitter man?

01-00:21:43

Coleman:

Oh, no, no. My father was not an angry man. My father, and I remember this story for a number of older people, they said -- now my father, when he married my mother he was in his 30s and my mother was 19. There was an age difference. And we always would go to church and sit on the second pew back and he would sit on the aisle. I would sit there, my mother, then my brother. Because they would split us up because the kids would play. And

when I got bored, I would play with his watch fob. And he was a quiet man. He never raised his voice. Would never shout or that. But he would look at you, and people would say, uh-oh, I'd better leave this guy alone.

01-00:22:33

Rubens: But were you instructed, in any way, when you think back on it, in how to deal with prejudice, to deal with race?

01-00:22:39

Coleman: No, I was instructed as a child that you respect your elders. I don't care who it is. Yes, ma'am. Yes, sir. No, ma'am. No, sir. And when we walked up and down the streets, you spoke to people. Good morning, good afternoon, how are you?

01-00:22:53

Rubens: So would you say that you yourself, until you're more conscious in college, don't really experience race prejudice? You're aware that you can't go into certain things but --

01-00:23:04

Coleman: Yeah, I'm aware of certain places but I was also taught that it's your behavior. How you present yourself. They may not like the color of your skin, but if you're courteous, fine. You may not get what you want right off the bat, but you'll get something.

01-00:23:21

Rubens: Let me ask you one question then I'm going to pull the history along. Did you go to the 1939 World's Fair?

01-00:23:27

Coleman: My uncle worked in the '39 World's Fair. And we went there because my grandfather got him the job with GE Electric.

01-00:23:36

Rubens: I see. That's the uncle worked at GE Electric?

01-00:23:38

Coleman: That's right (laughs). And we went to the World's Fair. In fact, I sang in the boys' choir. My brother and I. And they had the big cash register going. And they would put the numbers up there. And we sang one day for the World's Fair. Now, my father --

01-00:23:54

Rubens: With a church group?

01-00:23:56

Coleman: Yeah, it was kind of a church group, yeah. In fact, my church group used to deal with my mother and they used to sing on the radio. KLX. Whoops.

(Microphone falls off; reattachment is untranscribed)

01-00:24:48

Rubens: So your mother sang?

01-00:24:50

Coleman: My mother sang in the choir and she played the piano. And the one thing that happened, in grammar school, they used to have the Bell Telephone hour, I believe, where they would play classical music. And Sunday, my parents put on classical music. That's what we listened to. We listened to classical music and read. And the kids read. Now, the other thing that happened is, my grandfather, evidently -- I don't know how he did this -- but the mayor of Berkeley was a guy named Lawrence Cross. Mayor Lawrence Cross. I don't know if he was a Presbyterian minister or what, but he had a radio program called the Cross Cuts. And he would have guests, and my grandfather would be one of the guests or the church would sing songs. So, I kind of grew up in that Cross culture, if you will.

01-00:25:52

Rubens: Was Cross African American?

01-00:25:54

Coleman: Well, Cross, Lawrence Cross, the mayor of Berkeley, was white. He had a radio program called Cross Cuts. But my grandfather had the black church and the choir. And they would sing sometimes on the radio and have these interviews. And then there was the lady who was with our church, Theresa Hall Pitman I believe.

01-00:26:14

Rubens: Oh, yes? Really?

01-00:26:16

Coleman: Yeah. And she did --

01-00:26:17

Rubens: She was a writer for the Tribune. She was a very important woman.

01-00:26:20

Coleman: And they had -- she had a radio program or somebody on Sunday morning, would talk about (inaudible). And there was John K. Chapel who came through, who was a dentist. No, John K. Chapel was on KLX, a radio show, and he would come to our church sometimes and talk for different Father's days and all this sort of stuff.

01-00:26:48

Rubens: Let me just ask you if there's any one memory that you have at the World's Fair. You didn't feel out of place? There weren't too many African Americans there, although Lionel Hampton came, (inaudible) bands came.

01-00:27:00

Coleman: We had no problem because my uncle got us passes. So we went there more than once. We would go as a group or just go, my brother and I and the family



would go. And we never had any -- I don't recall, now I'm sure at some time something must have happened and my parents moved us aside and sheltered us. So I never felt I was being discriminated against. The only time, I guess I really remember this is -- I was in high school then but that's later. I'm trying to think of my early years. We would always go down to Chinatown for dinner when the family would go out. And we got along very well. Well, our neighbor was Japanese and then there was a Chinese family. So we knew them. And they had stores down on 7th Street and West Oakland. And when the war came out, we sponsored their son, because they went into the camps.

01-00:28:12

Rubens:

Well, that's what I wanted to ask you. Freeze that just for one second. So anything about the fair that stands out at all?

01-00:28:19

Coleman:

Yeah, I'm just trying to think anything about the fair.

01-00:28:21

Rubens:

No, I just wonder, did you love the, you know, the Brazil house or the cash register. But if there's no -- you were young.

01-00:28:27

Coleman:

Oh yeah, well no, I remember. The one thing I do remember about the fair was the arcade with all of the shows. And I remember as a kid, I don't know, there was Sally Rand Fan Dancers and we'd giggle about that. But I just remember that. Then they had the fountains and we enjoyed the fountains with the Pacifica, the Pacifica Queen Pacifica. And there's a couple other vivid memories of like Heinz 51 ketchup and the pickles. And my uncle would take us through the GE and that's when I first saw television. The first television. And there was a couple of other things. We used to go over and picnic by something like elephants.

01-00:29:21

Rubens:

Oh, that was the opening. Those were the major gates. They were called the Elephant Towers.

01-00:29:26

Coleman:

Elephant Towers, I remember seeing that. But I just remember riding across the bay because on 38th Street where the entrance to the Bay Bridge went across, as kids we'd stand on the corner there and they took all of the quarry rocks out of the quarry on MacArthur Boulevard by Edwards. All the rocks came out of there and we would stand and watch them when they were building Treasure Island. And then once they got Treasure Island built, we knew where the dirt came from. But the vivid memory I have is when the bridge opened, they took all of the chairs from the auditorium from our elementary school, which was only a block from the entrance because you went down underneath. And I was in the car with my grandparents and my family. We were about the 20th car that went across the Bay Bridge.

01-00:30:29  
Rubens: Fantastic. What kind of car was it? Do you remember?

01-00:30:32  
Coleman: It was my grandfather's car. It was --

01-00:30:34  
Rubens: So you always had a car? Did the family always have a car?

01-00:30:36  
Coleman: Oh yeah, my grandfather always had a car.

01-00:30:38  
Rubens: Did your father?

01-00:30:38  
Coleman: My father had a car, too. And he had a big fight with Moriss Plan because he missed a payment, or was late with a payment, and they took the thing and sold the thing out from under him.

01-00:30:51  
Rubens: During the Depression?

01-00:30:53  
Coleman: Yeah. And he --

01-00:30:55  
Rubens: The sixth car to cross the bridge --

01-00:30:57  
Coleman: No, it was in the ten, I think it was the tenth.

01-00:30:58  
Rubens: Oh, well, whatever.

01-00:31:00  
Coleman: It was in the first ten or 20. After the dignitaries, my grandfather's car went across.

01-00:31:05  
Rubens: And were you in it?

01-00:31:06  
Coleman: Oh, yeah I was in it. I was a kid. I just remember because Carla's father had died working on the bridge.

01-00:31:17  
Rubens: This is your friend?

01-00:31:18  
Coleman: Yeah, my friend. Well we were, like I say --

01-00:31:21  
Rubens: What was his name?

01-00:31:21  
Coleman: Well her name was Spalaso (sp?). He was Italian. They lived right across the street from the school.

01-00:31:26  
Rubens: Say the name one more time.

01-00:31:28  
Coleman: It was Italian. Carla Spalaso. Spalaso. And I don't know how it's spelled. I'll have to go look at my picture.

01-00:31:34  
Rubens: That's all right, that's all right.

01-00:31:35  
Coleman: But, her father died. And then she died. It was interesting because she died right in our sixth grade. She got sick. So all the little kids I played with, we were kind of close. Kids at this age --

01-00:31:54  
Rubens: Now let me freeze that and just say, how old were you when the war broke out? And yeah, what did your father --

01-00:32:02  
Coleman: OK (inaudible) '31 and the war broke out in '39, '38, '39. We got into it in the 40s, '41.

01-00:32:09  
Rubens: I mean you were born -- so you are 10. And I wondered what your father thought of the --

01-00:32:16  
Coleman: OK, my father died in '39. So he died before the war.

01-00:32:20  
Rubens: Your father or grandfather?

01-00:32:21  
Coleman: My father died. Well first of all he got sick. And he went to Letterman General Hospital. He was treated there. They discharged him. He came home. And he died in Berkeley General Hospital which is now called Alta Bates, the Merit campus.

01-00:32:41  
Rubens: Your father died when you were eight years old.

01-00:32:42  
Coleman: I was eight years old.

01-00:32:45

Rubens: Now your grandfather?

01-00:32:46

Coleman: My grandfather lived and he died until '49.

01-00:32:49

Rubens: Until '49? OK. That must have been tough.

01-00:32:51

Coleman: It was tough. But the thing is, my father died and then he got buried in the Presidio of San Francisco. So my history of the military goes back a ways because of my father. And since he was a minister, he was a chaplain for a lot of American Legions and he was also one of the chaplains up at the veteran's home at Yountville. So I would go with my dad up to -- my family would go up to Yountville occasionally when he would go see the patients there and the people living there. And he'd conduct service.

01-00:33:26

Rubens: And how old was he when he died?

01-00:33:29

Coleman: 44. He was 44 when he died.

01-00:33:30

Rubens: Oh, dear.

01-00:33:32

Coleman: Well, that's part of the problem. When he went to France, he must have had pretty hard times because they discriminated -- they got a lot of discrimination. So when he came back, he -- I don't know what happened but -- and this is part of the history that's blank and I've got to do some research -- he ended up in Boston and got involved with Mary Baker Eddy, the Christian Science. And then he left there and came to California. And he was not the typical Baptist minister. Because I always wanted to go to church when daddy preached and when grandpa preached because they never shouted and screamed like everybody else did.

01-00:34:21

Rubens: Tell me just a little bit more of when you made these trips with him to Yountville. What was that like for you? You were accompanying him --

01-00:34:31

Coleman: Well, we had a car then. We had a car and we would go up there. And there was a play area for the families and stuff like that. And I knew some of the people he visited because he was a chaplain for the American Legion post 269.

01-00:34:47

Rubens: American Legion?

01-00:34:49  
Coleman: The American Legion.

01-00:34:50  
Rubens: Wasn't the American Legion one of the most racist --

01-00:34:52  
Coleman: But there was a black post. There was a black post in West Oakland at Clawson School, not far from the church that he did (laughs). Yeah, he was racist. But, when we went up to Yountville, here's a chaplain. I don't care -- well, in the military the blacks could always advance as a chaplain. That's where you got rank. You were either a chaplain or a physician. And this is true in World War One. In fact, the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, do you know who it was founded by?

01-00:35:28  
Rubens: DuBois.

01-00:35:30  
Coleman: DuBois and?

01-00:35:33  
Rubens: Well, many people.

01-00:35:35  
Coleman: There was a Jewish captain, I'm blocking on his name, Spingarn. Joel Spingarn. DuBois and Spingarn founded the organization.

01-00:35:47  
Rubens: I see.

01-00:35:48  
Coleman: And Walter White. Well, as a kid, Walter White used to come by to the church. Of course he came by the church. He'd go by my grandpa and guess what.

01-00:35:59  
Rubens: You'd shine his shoes?

01-00:36:00  
Coleman: No. I'd shine his shoes (laughs). But I met Walter White, I met Paul Robeson, I met Marion Anderson. All of the people who came in the Bay Area to perform ended up in Oakland talking to my grandpa, and I met these people. And my father knew Jesse Owens. When I was a kid I went to see Jesse Owens. I mean, all of the dignitaries, the black dignitaries, I was exposed to them because of my grandfather and my father's business. Now, when my father died, grandpa still was very good at this. I met all these people. And see, that gives me a different thing. Now, remember, these people had dealt with prejudice but they always tried to shelter the kids. So we would never get in a situation where it would be overt racism. I knew it was there. I mean, I

was beginning to get a sense it was there. Especially once the war started and everything was, you know, the Japs.

01-00:36:57

Rubens: The troops were still segregated.

01-00:36:59

Coleman: Yeah, the troops were still segregated.

01-00:37:00

Rubens: Tell me, let me first ask you about when Earl Warren becomes governor and Pearl Harbor happens December 7th and by January, he, Earl Warren, has ordered that the Japanese be...

01-00:37:18

Coleman: Because of, and I'm blocking on the general from (inaudible) Army. [General John DeWitt]

01-00:37:22

Ruben: Stillwell? No. Yeah.

01-00:37:27

Coleman: He signed it. And he regretted it later on. But, hey, it was a hysteria.

01-00:37:33

Rubens: But what did your dad think?

01-00:37:34

Coleman: Well my dad was dead.

01-00:37:35

Rubens: Not your dad, I'm sorry, your granddad. Do you recall him saying anything and do you recall Japanese being moved out? You said your family sponsored somebody.

01-00:37:42

Coleman: Yeah. Well two doors from my grandfather was the Mizoti family. The Japanese family, Mizoti. And I forgot his first name, but my friend was named Harmi, or Harumi. We called him Harry. And his sister, Beatrice, and his older brother, Henry. We sponsored him because he went to Topaz down in Arizona. And when he went to go in the Army, they called us. Well, they sent us a letter. Well, when they left, they took the store but they didn't take the house because the house was in the names of the kids because there was an alien land law that said Asians can't hold property in California. But, they lost the store because it wasn't in his deed. They lost the whole thing. So, when they left, we came over. My mother went over there because my dad had died. Because the kids used to play in our house and we used to play in their house. And said, well, can I help you? Is there anything I can do for you? So, they had some stuff that we bought from them, as opposed to giving it away. We said, no, no, no, no. We'll pay for this. So we bought some of their furniture.

We bought, I remember, the first washing machine that had the rollers that spin (laughs). We bought it from them. Then they sent us letter and said, we need a sponsor to get in the service. So we wrote a letter, and my grandfather signed it, and sponsored him. And he ended up going into (inaudible) combat team. And he came by, after he got out, to thank us. And then when the war was over, the family moved back and got their house back. And then, of course, the war is over and we were in junior high and high school. No, after high school. And we socialized with them for a while, but at this point he got married and I was in college at that point. He moved to Sunnyvale and we just kind of drifted apart.

01-00:39:57

Rubens:

So do you remember your grandfather speaking out against that?

01-00:40:00

Coleman:

I don't remember him speaking out publicly. In fact, I was unaware he was doing a lot of this stuff publicly except Sunday dinner. Because we had a tradition, the family always had dinner together on Sunday. He would comment, well, I don't like this and I'm going to do something about that. And I'm not paying much attention. But, my mother said yeah, grandpa is a man you do not trifle with. That's a story I remember saying. Don't trifle with grandpa. And do not mess with -- she didn't say mess - she said, do not upset daddy. Anybody in the church did not upset my father, Kyster, because he was quiet.

01-00:40:44

Rubens:

Where did the name Kyster come from, do you know?

01-00:40:46

Coleman:

Yeah. Now that's a story (laughs) from the Civil War. The family history. Yeah. Kyster is a funny name, isn't it?

01-00:40:55

Rubens:

It is. I'm going to have to change the tape in just a few minutes. So, let me now, I'm interrupting you, but let me just get your narrative. We know that you go to Oakland Tech. I live right near Oakland Tech. You have this wonderful story about being a representative to Boys' State. And by then are you a serious student?

01-00:41:16

Coleman:

I was always a serious student. My brother was diabetic. He was big. He wanted to play football. My uncle played football. My uncle was an All-American End at Tech. In the O.A.L. Sam Coleman. He set the record (laughs). He was a track man. My brother wanted to do the same thing. And I was the little one. I was the runt.

[Audio File 2]

02-00:00:04

Rubens: This is tape two of April 6.

02-00:00:10

Coleman: I'm Gordon Coleman and I'm talking about my family history.

02-00:00:12

Rubens: Yeah, OK.

02-00:00:13

Coleman: Yeah. I wanted to back up and get a big piece. I didn't cover this. My father was a missionary and used to go down the valley. And as a result of this, in '37, we went to Yosemite. He took the family to Yosemite. Now, these kinds of experiences, when I talk to my peers, my black peers (inaudible). When I talk to my black peers and friends, they never experienced that kind of stuff because my father traveled a lot.

02-00:00:45

Rubens: He felt comfortable. He didn't feel confined.

02-00:00:48

Coleman: Yeah. He didn't feel confined. And as a result, I remember going at least twice to Yosemite with him. But I remember very clearly '37 because we stopped and came back to Don Pedro Dam. And I've got a picture. I'll bring it and show you. They took my brother and I, stuck us out in the middle of this swinging bridge by the dam. And I was scared to death (laughs). But daddy said stay still, be quiet. And he took this picture. And here I am, kind of half crying (laughs) standing on this swinging bridge. We used to go down there and at nighttime they had the fire falls.

02-00:01:23

Rubens: In Yosemite?

02-00:01:25

Coleman: In Yosemite.

02-00:01:26

Rubens: I remember.

02-00:01:26

Coleman: They would light the fire and then push it over. And I remember seeing this. And I would come back and tell my classmates in the school of what I did. In the auditorium in Longfellow, grammar school mind you, of the experience. And the teachers would say, you did this and did that? Oh my daddy did this and such.



02-00:01:46

Rubens: Well, it's the Depression.

02-00:01:48

Coleman: That's kind of what I had. This is the kind of experience I had. So we traveled all over the state as a kid in the family car. Until they lost the car, then my father died. My mother remarried. And we continued. And of course, the other end of the story, when I got to university, I spent a summer working for the forest service (inaudible).

02-00:02:08

Rubens: All right, let's get to this. You were talking about yourself being a good student, differentiating yourself from your brother.

02-00:02:15

Coleman: My brother, who was an athlete. Because hey, I was little, slight. So what I did was get into books. So in junior high school, I read War and Peace. Because my father had all these books on his shelf, and I went through every book he ever had.

02-00:02:32

Rubens: So, when you were a senior, where did you decide to go to college?

02-00:02:35

Coleman: Well, there was no question where I was going to college. From the time we went to grammar school, my mother and father got involved in the PTA and I remember in junior high school -- because he died when I was in junior high school -- in grammar school, my teacher lived on the corner. Her name was Miss Johnson. And her family had the store on West and 37th Street. She was my first grade, second grade teacher. And my parents said, Gordon and Kyster are going to college. Where? You're going to Cal. Now, I was the first one to finish Cal because my brother died. My diabetic brother died my senior year -- well he got sick, well he had diabetes. He was an orderly up at the old hospital, up where the

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

He died in '56, the year I graduated. But I was the first of the new generation to graduate from Cal. My other uncles went to Sacramento State and all these other places and went to medical school. But they went to Sacramento State and junior college and they never got to Cal. Well, I was the first one to graduate here.

02-00:03:56

Rubens: So when did you enter Cal?

02-00:03:59

Coleman: I entered in '49.

02-00:04:01  
Rubens: 1949 and --

02-00:04:03  
Coleman: I went in '49 as a freshman.

02-00:04:04  
Rubens: By the way, had you ever had, had you had African American teachers in high school or junior high?

02-00:04:09  
Coleman: Nope.

02-00:04:10  
Rubens: I didn't think so.

02-00:04:11  
Coleman: I didn't have any black teachers at all.

02-00:04:12  
Rubens: Yeah. And when you came in '49 --

02-00:04:13  
Coleman: I came in '49. My mother got sick with cancer and I had to stop school because my father's dead, and support mom. And that's why it took me five years to get through (laughs).

02-00:04:26  
Rubens: And you told me, I think, that your grandfather also died that year?

02-00:04:29  
Coleman: He died in '49 too, yeah.

02-00:04:30  
Rubens: Terrible. Did your mother die in '49?

02-00:04:33  
Coleman: No, my mother died in '68.

02-00:04:35  
Rubens: OK, she got sick, you had to help her.

02-00:04:37  
Coleman: Yeah, yeah, yeah. She had cancer.

02-00:04:38  
Rubens: But when your grandfather died, that must've been quite a blow. How old was he, roughly?

02-00:04:45  
Coleman: He had to be in his 80s.

02-00:04:48  
Rubens: And was the funeral pretty big? Did people --

02-00:04:50  
Coleman: Oh, it was the biggest funeral in the city. And he's buried out at, in Oakland, it's Chapel of Chimes on one side and then there's the other one, it's by (inaudible). It's called Evergreen Cemetery.

02-00:05:09  
Rubens: It's right there at 64<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

02-00:05:10  
Coleman: Yeah.

02-00:05:13  
Rubens: I can't say it. I'll go look for it. It's right by where I live. So, I'm pushing a little bit. Then you resumed school in...

02-00:05:21  
Coleman: I resumed school and graduated in '56.

02-00:05:24  
Rubens: And so, of your class --

02-00:05:26  
Coleman: In my class, I was the only black student in every class I had. Now, when you want to get into university, I can begin to really tell you when I started finding out what prejudice was and racism.

02-00:05:34  
Rubens: I want to hear. I want to hear.

02-00:05:36  
Coleman: You want to hear (inaudible)?

02-00:05:37  
Rubens: Well, maybe we'll -- no, because I want to get to the Oakland Army Base. So maybe we'll pull that back. We need to. Except for, are you in ROTC?

02-00:05:47  
Coleman: Yeah. When I came in here, in those days, every male had to take ROTC for at least two years. I came in and got in the thing and went through the program and figure, eh, daddy did this so OK, I'll go through this stuff. And I'd come from my classmates from Tech, so I knew all these kids. Well, Delucchi was in the class, he became an attorney and then discovered that his ancestors had worked on this Port Chicago thing, which he and I never resolved this issue. We had a little fight about that. Because they were on one side. They said these guys are going to be court-martialed and Thurgood Marshall said no, no, no, no. And of course, there was discrimination going on, but that's a long story. I was in ROTC, took the first two years and then decided -- my mother was sick -- I had to drop out. Came back and says, I

want to get a commission. I want to go through the advanced program because by this time --

02-00:06:54

Rubens: The Korean War.

02-00:06:55

Coleman: The Korean War was going and I didn't want to go to Korea in that state. And all of my classmates from Tech who I had been socializing with said, hey Gordon, get in ROTC, get a commission and then when you go, at least you'll be in the middle. So, I applied, got accepted, and started going through the training program. And the first exam I had I didn't do very well. And I said, well I got minimum passing. That was a grade. They said, everybody has to have minimum passing to keep on. So I got a minimum passing score. And the guy says, you're going to flunk out. I said, well no. He said, let me tell you, minimum passing is a D, you can't keep in this program with a D. And he says, furthermore, I don't like you. And I said, sir? He said, I don't like colored people. He said, but I'm from the South, I'm an honorable officer. He said I believe in honor. He said, I was raised, I don't like colored people. He said, the only reason I'm talking to you is my colored sergeant -- he'd just come back from Korea -- saved me, and I have a debt to pay. The sergeant had no family, I couldn't find anybody who knew him, so I couldn't pay back the debt of honor. He says, you walk in here, and I see this black face in my class (laughs) and you're going to be my debt. I'm going to either run you out of this class, or you're going to learn this material. I said, OK.

02-00:08:42

Rubens: Had you ever been talked to that way?

02-00:08:43

Coleman: Nope (laughs). Well I'd been talked to because I had a girlfriend in high school who was Jewish. Now, remember, during that time period the best we ever had was hold hands and kiss. That's it. That's it. Her father was a physician and her mother was a concert pianist. That's my first real love. And I used to go by the house and I'd take her flowers, and I played chess with her brother because I did all the intellectual stuff, and we talked about all kinds of stuff. And I remember in graduation, the week before graduation, she had a party and her father met me coming in the house. He said, Gordon, I want to talk to you. I said, yes, sir. He said, I don't want you to get too involved with my daughter. And I said, sir? He said, she's leaving here going back to Sarah Lawrence -- it's for education -- and he said, you're not Jewish, you're a nice kid, and all this stuff, but don't get too involved because she's Jewish and you know, it's just not going to work. And I said, well thank you, I appreciate that. And I had to think, man, I said, but you know, what he's telling me, I was angry but he said, you know -- he was honest, he's upfront. And that's what I've always taught.

02-00:10:12

Rubens: So no one had talked to you until this guy?

02-00:10:15

Coleman: No, no, he had started. So I had thought about that. And my mother said, son, I kept trying to tell you don't get too involved. So, now I get into university and the guy said, I don't like colored people (laughs). So, the next day, I walk in class and the first question -- they sat everybody alphabetical by alphabet.

02-00:10:38

Rubens: No other black man?

02-00:10:39

Coleman: No, I was the only black guy in every class I ever took in this place. If my brother wasn't in the class or some of my friends, I was it. First day I come in, he asked me a question. Coleman, and they call you, so I stood up and he asked me a question, I couldn't answer it. He asked me another question. I couldn't answer that. He asked me a third. I answered that one. Then I sat down. At the end of the class, before the clock rang. Coleman! Yes, sir. And he asked me a question. I couldn't answer it. And I figure, I've got a problem with this guy. I said, this guy's serious. I'd better start studying this. So after the class left and my friend deCamp, Bill deCamp says, Gordon, what's going on? And I told him what happened and he says, yeah, this guy's after you. He said, you're going to have to start studying. Get in the books and learn this. Well, Bill was a friend of mine and he became a major general. His father was a military man living in the Presidio at the time. And his father, before he passed on, he became a brigadier general. And Bill said, this is what's going on. He explained the military to me from the standpoint of an officer.

02-00:12:01

Rubens: How do you spell deCamp?

02-00:12:02

Coleman: DeCamp. D-E-C-A-M-P. William deCamp, class of '56. And I went down to the alumni house to ask about the people and I went in ROTC and asked about these people, and they don't have any records. Anyway, the next day, hey, I came in, I had my class. Everyday, he'd ask me the first question and the last question. I always answered the first question. Went to summer camp, graduated, got commissions. There was roughly 80 Army officers, a total of 100, but they had them in January and in June. I graduated in June. But they had one big ceremony for everybody. Out of the 101 person I academically came out number 4. The guy scared me (laughs).

02-00:13:02

Rubens: What was your major?

02-00:13:04

Coleman: Oh, I was in environmental health. In those days it was public health. And guess what the name of the hall was. Warren Hall. I was the first class to

graduate out of Warren Hall. And I figured, isn't this kind of serendipitous. What's going on here? (laughs)

02-00:13:21

Rubens: By the way, where were you -- so '54 you're in college when the big decision comes down?

02-00:13:29

Coleman: Well, no. It was in '48 when Truman integrated the service.

02-00:13:36

Rubens: Yeah, no, that's not what I mean. I mean the Brown versus the Board of Education.

02-00:13:42

Coleman: Yeah. That's, I don't remember very much --

02-00:13:47

Rubens: You said, that's the Earl Warren I know (laughs).

02-00:13:48

Coleman: Yeah, yeah. The Brown decision came through and then later on, the whole thing. But I really wasn't affected.

02-00:13:56

Rubens: You were doing your studies, you were doing your...

02-00:13:57

Coleman: Yeah, I was too busy with all this other stuff.

02-00:14:00

Rubens: OK. Now you graduate in '56 in public health and what are you going to do?

02-00:14:03

Coleman: I graduated in public health. No, before I graduate, the professor calls me in and says, Gordon. Yes, sir? He said, you know, you're graduating such and such, he says, I've got to tell you, you can't get a job. I said, I beg your pardon, sir. He said, nobody's going to hire you. I said, wait a minute, I've got a college degree in this, I'm the president of my class here, and you're telling me I can't get a job? He said, I guess we should have talked about this earlier, but he said, you won't be able to get a job. I said, sir, I'm going in the military. Because I was commissioned and I was going to go, I had signed up, I had a two year commitment. He said, well, hopefully that'll help.

02-00:14:52

Rubens: Does he tell you --

02-00:14:53

Coleman: He tells me this.

02-00:14:54

Rubens: No, but does he say because you have the wrong color skin?

02-00:14:57  
Coleman: Oh, yeah, he said, because you're black (laughs). It's obvious. Hey, I'm the only guy in the class. Now, all the rest of these guys had gone in and done their things. I was the first black to come through the school of public health.

02-00:15:08  
Rubens: Through the school of public health?

02-00:15:10  
Coleman: I was public health and graduated with an environmental health degree.

02-00:15:12  
Rubens: Now, by the way, just because we'll pick this up again, but are you saying that Norville Smith was in your class?

02-00:15:18  
Coleman: He graduated in that class. No, not in public health.

02-00:15:20  
Rubens: Not in environmental health.

02-00:15:22  
Coleman: Oh, he graduated in '56 too. Berkeley, in education I think.

02-00:15:26  
Rubens: Yeah, I think so. Did you know him?

02-00:15:28  
Coleman: Oh, I knew him. Well, we didn't socialize.

02-00:15:30  
Rubens: You said there was a handful of --

02-00:15:32  
Coleman: Yeah, we knew each other. But, because once I started working for the county and he was at Merritt, our Dr. Malcolm had what we called Intergroup Relationship -- but he brought all the groups together, we talked about our history.

02-00:15:51  
Rubens: But you said there was a handful of African Americans at Berkeley.

02-00:15:57  
Coleman: Yeah. Al Broussard was going to law school at that time. And Thelton Henderson was playing football. And all these kids, we knew each other socially because I got into an interracial fraternity.

02-00:16:09  
Rubens: What was that?

02-00:16:10  
Coleman: Beta Sigma Tau, from Baldwin (sp?). And we had our frat house over on Haste Street. And, there was --

02-00:16:17  
Rubens: That must've been the only integrated --

02-00:16:19  
Coleman: It was the only integrated fraternity on campus. Or sorority. Greek letter organization.

02-00:16:26  
Rubens: Were there black women here?

02-00:16:28  
Coleman: Yep, but they did not have an integrated sorority. And in fact, they had a sorority here but I didn't deal with them very much. Because, now, in Beta Sig, the guys in there were World War Two veterans and people coming out of Korea. And they didn't take any crap from people (laughs). We've been shot at and all this sort of stuff, and that's the group I came in with. And while I was in college, all of my girlfriends were not black. They were everything else but that. And they'd look at me, and I'd look at them, say, what's your problem? Nothing. (inaudible)

02-00:17:07  
Rubens: Any black professors at all?

02-00:17:09  
Coleman: None. I never saw a black professor on this campus.

02-00:17:13  
Rubens: There was really only one, statistics.

02-00:17:17  
Coleman: Yeah, stats, and hey, I had no -- I was surprised to see a black professor here.

02-00:17:22  
Rubens: So let's do the thinnest line now, just getting the history. So you graduate in June and when do you go into...

02-00:17:28  
Coleman: Right away I go into Korea.

02-00:17:29  
Rubens: You are sent to Korea?

02-00:17:31  
Coleman: I get sent to Korea. I go into Korea.

02-00:17:32  
Rubens: How do you literally go to Korea? Physically? Do you go to the Oakland Army Base?



02-00:17:36  
Coleman:

No, I go to Fort Sam Houston, then I go to the Oakland Army Base. And in those days it was called a personnel center. And if you look at my orders there, they tell you, they put race on there. Now, remember, Truman has signed this document that says he's going integrate the services in '48. Executive order 9981. And, if you look on there, it'll see there behind my name it's got Negro, N-E-G. My name is down at the bottom. It says here, Caucasians unless otherwise indicated. They put race on all the orders. Caucasian unless otherwise indicated. Everything in Korea I had, they knew who I was before I walked in the door. And I was the only black guy there. Now, I was in a medical battalion -- I was assigned to a tank battalion.

02-00:18:39  
Rubens:

How do you get assigned to that?

02-00:18:42  
Coleman:

Well, one, I came from the University of California and I was considered to be a sanitary engineer.

02-00:18:50  
Rubens:

That didn't mean janitor, did it?

02-00:18:53  
Coleman:

No, sanitary engineer. OK. There's an engineer, there's a straight degree in engineering and then there's a degree in sanitary engineering and then there's a professional engineer, and mechanical, electrical, etc.

02-00:19:13  
Rubens:

Oh, I got it. Out of your public health.

02-00:19:14  
Coleman:

Out of public health. In fact, I took courses in sanitary engineering at the lab down here where they had the big press, on the other end of the circle. There was an engineering laboratory. I took water and hydraulic engineering courses. So, when I got to Korea, they saw my record and they said, we don't want this guy here we're going to stick him up north because we don't want him in the headquarters. OK.

02-00:19:41  
Rubens:

Because you're black?

02-00:19:42  
Coleman:

Well, I found out after I got there because when I got in the personnel pipeline -- well, I came in -- what's the date of this? Sixth of September, '56. I went into the personnel center which is the Oakland Army Base.

02-00:19:58  
Rubens:

From Sam Houston? Is that your training?

02-00:20:00  
Coleman:

Yeah, I was trained at Fort Sam Houston.

02-00:20:02

Rubens: And how do you literally get to this personnel center? Literally, physically. Train, car...

02-00:20:07

Coleman: No, no, no. OK. I'll tell you. They give me orders. I went down to Fort Sam Houston by car with a black dentist who ended up in Walter Reed. We drove down there. And then when I left -- we graduated from the basic course -- myself and a Hawaiian guy and three white guys, we drove all the way back to California. And these were classmates of mine.

02-00:20:36

Rubens: From Cal?

02-00:20:37

Coleman: Well, one of them was from Cal and the other were from Sam Houston. I came back to California, Oakland by car and got the orders. And then I went down, my mother drove me, down to the Oakland Army Base the day I was supposed to report. I stayed the night. And the next thing, they put me on the bus, went to Travis Air Force Base, and I flew from Travis all the way into Korea.

02-00:21:03

Rubens: Had you ever been on the army base or at the personnel center before?

02-00:21:05

Coleman: No. I played down there as a kid. That's part of the other piece I didn't tell you (laughs). My father, we used to go down to the creeks. We explored all the creeks. The Temescal Creek that ran into the bay. And as a kid, my brother and I and kids in the neighborhood would go out there with jars and catch frogs. And my mother was really upset, but my father said no, he's learning, let him alone. I'd come home covered with blue mud with these frogs in a jar. And (inaudible) on the other side is the army base. The base was there, but it was beginning to expand. And then, of course, he died. We used to play on the sites and then I would wander down through the area. As kids nobody would bother you. We just wandered up and down the streets and see what was going on. So that was my first experience. I remember when they were building buildings there. I'd come back from Korea and they sent me to Oakland but then they sent me over to San Francisco port of embarkation, Fort Mason, got a set of orders, came back and then they sent me to Fort Lewis Washington. So I bought a car by then, drove up to Fort Lewis Washington and came back. Discharged, my first assignment was down at the reserve center in the Oakland Army Base. That's when I met Conway Peterson and all the rest of these guys coming through the system. We moved from the warehouse to the new building and have been involved. When I came back from Korea, the chaplain who I knew from overseas was assigned at the Oakland Army Base. And I invited him over for dinner. And, it's interesting, I'm not sure if he's white or black. He's somewhere in the middle. But he was from Virginia. And he and my mother got in a conversation. And they kept talking about people

that they knew separately. And I said, are you black? And he says, well, I could pass (laughs).

02-00:23:31

Rubens: What was his name?

02-00:23:32

Coleman: His name was -- in fact, he gave me a Bible, he inscribed it and gave me some stuff. His name was Sterling Long. He was chaplain, he was a captain, and I think he retired. He lived in Los Angeles. But, as a result of this, my mother wanted a new piano. I bought her a new piano. We gave the piano she played in our house to the Army base and they took it. It was in one of the chapels, and I don't know what happened to it. But I gave it to them.

02-00:24:03

Rubens: How big a piano was it?

02-00:24:04

Coleman: It was an upright. Upright piano. Because my mother played the piano. Was it Spinet? I've forgotten the make. So the family piano went there. My military career started in the Oakland Army base and from there to Camp Parks, and then I went to the Presidio San Francisco, and then I went to to the Army college.

02-00:24:31

Rubens: Where is the war college?

02-00:24:33

Coleman: Carlisle, Pennsylvania. And I took the family there.

02-00:24:36

Rubens: What year about?

02-00:24:37

Coleman: That was '81. '81-'82. It was a one-year course. And by that time, I started trying to get promoted. And the system ate me up.

02-00:24:54

Rubens: Well, we'll get to that. I want to just ask you this, how long were you in Korea?

02-00:25:00

Coleman: One year, I think I was in there a year and a half. I was there from '56 to '58.

02-00:25:13

Rubens: We'll get it. We can get it exact.

02-00:25:15

Coleman: Yeah. I got to Fort Lewis Washington in the end of December '57. So I was there for a year. A little over a year. A year and half, I think.

02-00:25:33

Rubens: In Korea, what did you literally do in Korea?

02-00:25:38

Coleman: In Korea I was attached to a tank battalion, a separate tank battalion above the DMZ. There were two black officers there. One of them was a company commander and he got bounced out for inappropriate behavior. And the other one was a lieutenant who shipped out soon after. I was the only staff officer because I was the medical service camp officer. There was no medical officer for the whole battalion and I was it. I had a detachment of 21 enlisted people. And I was a second lieutenant.

02-00:26:30

Rubens: What were you literally doing? What did it mean to be a medical officer?

02-00:26:33

Coleman: OK, I was the medical service camp officer. Any medical problem they had, I had to deal with it. I had to treat them, take care of them, and ship them back.

02-00:26:41

Rubens: Was there literally a --

02-00:26:42

Coleman: I had a couple of deaths that I had to deal with. People got shot.

02-00:26:45

Rubens: Was there a hospital there?

02-00:26:46

Coleman: Oh, no. It was a dispensary. It was a small, two-man -- it was a dispensary. We had a dentist who was my roommate and myself. The dentist and the medical officer, myself, lived there. And if we had any real emergency, we either shipped them out by ambulance, which was too far down to the division, so we had to call in the helicopter to pick them up, like M.A.S.H. and transport them out. And I got there and ran across my first big problem. I ran to the colonel and I said, sir, I don't know how to deal with this problem but I want to transfer him because this guy is getting racist. And the colonel looked at me, he said, Gordon, you're a Californian just like I am. He says, I'm glad you talked to me about this, but you know, we've integrated the Army and you're going to run across these kinds of problems, so you'd best learn how to deal with these issues. I'll help you this one time, the rest of it, it's up to you.

02-00:27:54

Rubens: And how did he help you?

02-00:27:57

Coleman: He said, I will approve -- because the first thing (inaudible) is I want to get rid of this guy. He said, we don't transfer people out. I said, sir. He said, yeah, but you're a Cal graduate and I'm a West Pointer, and we're from the same place.

This is the one freebie you get out of me because when I checked in, he says, lieutenant, in this unit, everybody gets along. But I'm going to tell you, you are going to do the getting along, because I'm not. I said, OK.

02-00:28:33

Rubens: Did you basically that year and a half get along?

02-00:28:36

Coleman: Oh (inaudible) after that. I learned. Because he says, and I remember my friend, deCamp, I met two of my classmates from Cal over there. And I told them where I was, and the guys says, Jesus Christ man, what happened? I said, well look at me. And they says, yeah, I'm sorry, Gordon. He said, well, you're going to get the short stick for everything that happens, but I'll tell you, take it with a smile and learn everything you can because when you move up the system, and you will move through the system, he says, nobody will ever be able to pull the wool over your eyes and they can't B.S. you about anything because you will have learned how to do it.

02-00:29:10

Rubens: Who's telling you this?

02-00:29:21

Coleman: My two classmates.

02-00:29:22

Rubens: DeCamp and...

02-00:29:23

Coleman: DeCamp and this other guy, Wierseman, Ken Wierseman. And when Colonel Foster left -- oh, the other story I didn't tell you. When I graduated and I got commissioned, the guy said he didn't like me. He walked up to me, and I saluted the guy, and he says, Gordon -- no, Coleman, not first name. Coleman, he said, I knew you could do it, I'm proud of you, he said, still don't like colored folks. I said, it's all right, I can deal with that. I know, up yours, but OK (laughs). And guess what, I got to be a major and I ran across Bill deCamp. And I said, Bill (inaudible). He says, Gordon, don't worry about it. He said, he's going to look out for you. I said, what are you talking about? He said, he is going to monitor you and make sure you get everything you need to learn the system and move up the system. He said one of his jobs was to be the mentor of all of us guys who graduated. I said, what do you mean? He said, my daddy told me. That's who the guy was (laughs). I'll be damned.

02-00:30:37

Rubens: Wow. What experiences. I'm going to go just about another five, ten minutes.

02-00:30:43

Coleman: OK. Like I said, I've got to sign your paper too.

02-00:30:45  
Rubens: Well we can wait on that. I do want to ask you if, while you were in Korea -- I don't know what the word is -- did you have any R and R? Did you come to any cities?

02-00:30:55  
Coleman: Oh, did I (laughs).

02-00:30:57  
Rubens: I'm just wondering, I want to know how Koreans reacted to you.

02-00:31:04  
Coleman: The Koreans? Hey.

02-00:31:06  
Rubens: And if you saw any other African American enlisted men as opposed to officers.

02-00:31:09  
Coleman: I saw a lot of African American enlisted men. And I ended up being on... It's interesting. I'm sure, this guy, the colonel, says you're going to do the getting along. He gave me every job that I could possibly have. I ended up being a motorpool officer, I ended up being the mess officer, I ended up being supply. And I've got my own detachment. I had to do all this for my own self. But he made me do it for the whole battalion. So I learned everything and I got to sit on boards. And I couldn't believe it. I was the only lieutenant who ended up being on a court martial board, prosecution and defense. They'd rotate me back and forth. And then, he sent me down to division to sit on the large boards. And I was a junior officer which means I did all the work. Now, I figure well it's part of my experience. I didn't particularly care for it, but I never caught guard duty and all the rest of that garbage. So, when I came out of the place, I knew I was really meshed in the military system and how it works. So, when I came back -- well, in Korea, the Korean women and the population and my houseboy, they just thought the world of me because I was the only minority person there. And I treated these people the same way (inaudible), you know. The GIs in those times were racist in a lot of sense. You get away from home, all the boundaries are gone.

02-00:32:53  
Rubens: Well, and you've never been in this situation.

02-00:32:55  
Coleman: And you do stuff that wouldn't normally have done at home. So, that's what I did in Korea. Now, when I got up to Fort Lewis, I ran across the same thing.

02-00:33:08  
Rubens: Now you mentioned you had a houseboy. Was that true of officers?

02-00:33:11  
Coleman:

Well, no. It was a houseboy just for me. Well, we had officers' quarters where we all lived. And I had a houseboy named Kim. I mean, everybody's named Kim (laughs). And he would come and clean up and shine my shoes and make the bed and all this sort of stuff.

02-00:33:31  
Rubens:

But people of your grade.

02-00:33:32  
Coleman:

Yeah, my grade, yeah. And the colonel had a separate houseboy. And everybody else shared people. But I had a separate one. Because, see, what I did was, since I had the dispensary, I would go down into the village on my own and say, what's going on? And it turned out that the people realized I was going to try to help these people. And I'd help the houseboy. And he'd invited me into the village to have dinner with him. I end up eating dog, you name it, I did it.

02-00:34:05  
Rubens:

Now, let me ask you just a couple things and then I think we'll bring this one to an end. So when you come back -- just tell me, why was it called the personnel center?

02-00:34:15  
Coleman:

See, it was the Oakland Army Base but it's called the headquarters and personnel center. And it was out of Fort Mason. It's a personnel center. In fact, if you go down there now, the building's still there, the big warehouse. You may even see some of the signs that say personnel.

02-00:34:37  
Rubens:

Let me ask you one other thing.

02-00:34:40  
Coleman:

It fell off the wall.

02-00:34:41  
Rubens:

I put it behind you so we would have a little...

02-00:34:47  
Coleman:

It was called the personnel center.

02-00:34:48  
Rubens:

OK. So, in fact, when you came back --

02-00:34:52  
Coleman:

It was still there, same place.

02-00:34:53  
Rubens:

But you weren't there at the base very long when you first came back.

02-00:34:58  
Coleman: No. You come in and they process you. You're back in the United States. They check your paperwork and then they make arrangements for you to go to your next station, your duty station.

02-00:35:06  
Rubens: And that was?

02-00:35:07  
Coleman: I went up to Fort Lewis. So I was there for two days, maximum. Spent the night then left.

02-00:35:15  
Rubens: And then when were you released from the Army?

02-00:35:21  
Coleman: I got out of the active Army in '59. I've got my release orders somewhere. I'll have to (inaudible) for you.

02-00:35:30  
Rubens: Yeah, we'll come back. And then is that when you go to work for Alameda?

02-00:35:35  
Coleman: Yeah, there's another story (inaudible) (laughs).

02-00:35:37  
Rubens: OK, well we'll do that. I just want the dates.

02-00:35:40  
Coleman: Then I went to work for Alameda County Health Department, environmental health section.

02-00:35:42  
Rubens: OK. And basically stayed there for a year?

02-00:35:46  
Coleman: Well, I stayed there for, I got roughly 20 some years in. But see, I would go back on active duty off and on.

02-00:35:54  
Rubens: Yeah, we'll talk about that. So then, just overall, Alameda County --

02-00:35:59  
Coleman: And then I retired from Alameda County --

02-00:36:00  
Rubens: In 1960...

02-00:36:02  
Coleman: No, no, '98.

02-00:36:04  
Rubens: '98 you retired --



02-00:36:05  
Coleman:

I retired from the county.

02-00:36:06  
Rubens:

And you started in I think '50..

02-00:36:08  
Coleman:

Oh, I started in '59.

02-00:36:10  
Rubens:

1959? And then finally, then during that period did you marry?

02-00:36:16  
Coleman:

Oh, yeah. I got married. Well, during that time I was working for the county, I got a leave of absence, went back to the war college, went on active duty. And every three months, twice a year, I would go back on active duty for a month. The county was very good to me. And I'd go back in it because, I was at that point -- I still stayed in environmental health but I got into toxicology (inaudible) hazardous material. And I would go back to Aberdeen proving ground, which was doing the same thing for the military. So I end up writing publications for the military as well as for our profession.

02-00:36:50  
Rubens:

Oh, I need to have a list of that. We'll get that. And when did you get married?

02-00:36:55  
Coleman:

I got married in '62. Well, I was in grad school, got married while I was in grad school.

02-00:37:04  
Rubens:

In Howard? You went to Howard for grad school?

02-00:37:05  
Coleman:

In Howard. I went to Howard University, yeah.

02-00:37:07  
Rubens:

And how high a degree did you get?

02-00:37:10  
Coleman:

Well, I didn't. My mother was sick. Well, she died. She got real sick again, so it got worse. I dropped out of school. I was in dental school for two years. And I just said, to hell with it. I got into black culture and I just didn't fit. And people told me, Gordon, you're going to have a hard time. I said, well why? He says, you're not black. I go, what are you talking about I'm not black? Well you don't talk like it. You don't act like it. You don't have the same values. I said, guys, I don't believe you.

02-00:37:43  
Rubens:

But you chose to go to Howard, to a black school.

02-00:37:46  
Coleman: That's right. Well I chose to go there because I couldn't get in University of San Francisco. And then I discovered, lo and behold, my classmate before me, the second black to graduate from the medical school, the university had a policy, one black student every four years. And that applied for dental school. And one of the guys who I knew from this group that I'm in, Ken Cusick (sp?), who graduated here who's a crew member who knows Peterson -- all three of us guys are friends now. We didn't know each other in college but once we got in the military we became close. He taught there. And he says, he tried to get me in the one that's run in Stockton, COP. There was a separate dental school there. And he says Gordon, I can't. They've got a quota.

02-00:38:50  
Rubens: Who was the first guy who graduated?

02-00:38:53  
Coleman: It was Wendell Lipson. The first black. Wendell Lipson and the next one was Dale Lipson. Dale Tipton was a classmate of mine. We were in the same group. I would've graduated with him but I had to stop school to take care of my mother.

02-00:39:09  
Rubens: We'll get to that.

02-00:39:12  
Coleman: He applied -- he got there the third time.

02-00:39:14  
Rubens: Wendell?

02-00:35:15  
Coleman: No. Tipton. Wendell got there first. But see, I knew Wendell's father. My grandfather helped the Lipson family (laughs). So, the story goes on. I mean, there's a connection, there's a piece to all of this.

02-00:39:39  
Rubens: OK, we'll do that. Just to have it on the record, what was the name of your wife?

02-00:39:39  
Coleman: Oh, my wife is Cela Moris Belden.

02-00:39:41  
Rubens: C-E?

02-00:39:42  
Coleman: C-E-L-A. Moris Belden. B-E-L-D-E-N.

02-00:39:46  
Rubens: And so you married while in Howard?

02-00:39:48  
Coleman: In Howard. But I knew her from the university because she was the maid of honor to a friend of mine who went to school with Broussard and Headerson. And she's white. French descent. And we've got two kids.

02-00:40:07  
Rubens: That's what I want to know. So then she came back here with you?

02-00:40:10  
Coleman: No, I married in Berkeley. I stayed there and she stayed here. And she lived in Mexico for a year and I finished my school. And then me and the dean decided to quit, to drop. I came back here. Went back to the health department. They reinstated me. And we raised a family.

02-00:40:29  
Rubens: Then she joined here?

02-00:40:31  
Coleman: Yeah. By this time, she came back to Berkeley.

02-00:40:35  
Rubens: And then you had two kids?

02-00:40:37  
Coleman: Two kids.

02-00:40:38  
Rubens: Two kids. So when were they born?

02-00:40:39  
Coleman: The first one was born in (laughs). The first one was born in '67, May of '67. And the last one was born in June of '69.

02-00:40:55  
Rubens: And what are their names?

02-00:40:56  
Coleman: John is the one in '67 and David in '69.

02-00:41:01  
Rubens: Two boys? Fabulous, fabulous.

02-00:41:03  
Coleman: And then we started going to family reunions. Which is another story.

02-00:41:06  
Rubens: Well, I think we're going to stop. But I just think this is extraordinary. And then we really have your whole senior military, you know.

Interview #2: April 30, 2007.  
[Audio File 3]

03-00:00:00

Rubens: Today is April 30 --

03-00:00:10

Coleman: Monday, April 30 --

03-00:00:10

Rubens: This is our second interview with Mr. Coleman.

03-00:00:15

Coleman: And it's 14:50.

03-00:00:22

Rubens: And Mr. Coleman, I wanted to just ask you, in reviewing what we talked about last week -- or two weeks ago -- or three weeks ago, apparently --

03-00:00:32

Coleman: Three weeks ago.

03-00:00:34

Rubens: -- we wanted to review just a couple of things, because the interview brought up more about the climate --

03-00:00:43

Coleman: The climate of the University.

03-00:00:44

Rubens: -- here at Berkeley, which is not so welcoming for the few African Americans that were here, so tell me about that.

03-00:00:49

Coleman: Yeah, it was very interesting, because there were roughly about ten or 15 blacks on campus at the time, and we knew each other, oddly enough. But I was in public health. I decided to go into public health, and I took courses at the old T buildings, and I was in the first graduating class in Earl Warren Hall, which is kind of interesting, because I knew Earl Warren as a kid. I knew him. As I kid, I shined his shoes.

03-00:01:19

Rubens: And we talked about that, Heidi Bowles (sp?) --

03-00:01:20

Coleman: Heidi, yeah. But I find it very interesting that we graduate out of his hall. But he was a governor at that time -- no, Goodwin Knight, he had moved onto Washington. And some of the classes I had, I went back and looked at my transcripts, and all the classes I had as an undergraduate, I got average grades -- C's -- and I always wondered, you know, "I can do better than this. Why was this?" And then I started thinking about it, and it turns out my impression

was -- and my feeling was -- some of the professors and the teachers didn't like my association of girlfriends I had at the University here. There were very few black women here, so I dated Chinese, white, Filipino, whatever. And in some cases -- you may say a little indiscretion -- but I would be walking down campus holding hands, or hugging somebody, or in a corridor when nobody's around, I'd sneak a kiss. I got caught twice by two professors that way.

03-00:02:22

Rubens:

What did they say when you got caught?

03-00:02:22

Coleman:

They didn't say a word. They just looked at me. The people I was dating, at this time, were taking classes. There were three of us. There was myself, another guy, and a Navy guy -- gentleman -- whom I knew who kind of took me under his wing. And this guy is Norwegian, Art Martinsen -- S-E-N. (laughter) In fact, I still -- we graduated in the same class. We all studied together. We all had the same grades. They got the A's and B's, and I got the C, and when I went to complain to the professors -- and one of them was named Bill Reeves, and the other one was named Styles -- Dr. Styles -- and these guys were very high in the field of public health -- when I complained about my grades, they would pull out their grade sheets and go through the quizzes, and it would turn out that for some reason, I was always half a point or one point below everybody else. And I'm saying, "Something's wrong here!" Because we'd pull out the quizzes, and go through the thing, and they said, "Well, that's how it works out." So I gave up after a while. The thing that really happened, I got elected as the vice president of the graduating class out of public health, and we had a meeting at Spengers Restaurant, and I invited my mother to come along, and meet all the professors. Everybody was nice, and she said, "You know, Gordon," she said, "You know, this is the first time I've been in here, because we weren't very welcome -- the blacks weren't very welcome in Spengers." And that's when we went back, and she revealed that growing up here in the thirties, you couldn't go to Trader Vick's that was on San Pablo, there was a Zombie Village, you couldn't go. In fact, you go down to Telegraph, there was a Larry Blake's. Upstairs was a dining room, and people would go in there to have dinner, and they would wait forever until they got a table or seated, and they word got -- "Hey, don't go there. You can go downstairs in the Rathskeller or the bar..." And this brings up a feeling -- there was a gentleman here going to school -- well, not a gentleman, a classmate of mine -- Ali Bhutto, who ended up being the president of Pakistan when the British Empire began to fall apart. His daughter Benazir was a premier, but Ali got killed by -- well, the military took over. But we used to sit down in Robby's and talk about all of these issues in class.

03-00:04:56

Rubens:

He was an undergraduate?

03-00:04:57

Coleman:

He was an undergrad student, yeah. He graduated --

03-00:04:59

Rubens: Where did he live?

03-00:05:01

Coleman:

I think he lived at the I House, but you'd have to go check the books. He wasn't in my class -- in my graduating class of '56 -- he was in that timeframe. All of us kids -- or all of us undergrads who were -- well, there was Thelton Henderson, who's a judge, Norvel Smith, all these guys, we used to kind of go down and drink beer, and just socialize with everybody. We met and would have all kinds of -- what do you call it? -- gab fests, beer busts, or whatever, and talk about life, and all that sort of stuff. It was nice then. I didn't pay much attention to it, and I thought it was great, until I got out and got to thinking about, "You know, we had a good time here, but the University really since we were few in numbers and they didn't have a lot of minority students -- and they didn't have a lot of foreign students." Most of them stayed at the I House, and even then, I House was built by Rockefeller, so people came out of state and stayed there, and they weren't necessarily other countries or ethnic groups. We would have discussions about things like that. In fact, one of the strong -- the president of the student body, Pete Goldschmidt -- Jewish fellow -- we used to go to synagogue on Sunday morning, or whatever. This group would go to all -- Newman Hall, the Catholic, we'd go to synagogue, we'd go to the Baptist churches, we would go to all these different things, all the guys and the girls, and this was kind of the socialization process. We didn't feel we were being discriminated against, but we just felt, "Ahh -- certain things just didn't quite..."

03-00:06:38

Rubens: Now, you belonged to a fraternity. Tell me about...

03-00:06:40

Coleman:

I belonged to an interracial fraternity called Beta Sigma Tau. It started out of Ohio at Baldwin-Wallace, I believe. We had a chapter here, and we had a fraternity house over on Haste Street, and we had parties and all of the older guys -- well, they were all veterans who came in, and most of them -- well, the major veterans were white, and these guys had been through World War II, and when they came back, it was an idea, "We're here to get an education and to get along," and they didn't take any crap from anybody.

03-00:07:14

Rubens: Were there other people -- other African Americans?

03-00:07:16

Coleman:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. There was this guy Dale Tipton, who's an attorney; Bob Burns, who's a doctor -- excuse me. Dale Tipton's a physician. He was the second black to graduate from UC.

03-00:07:30

Rubens: Not Thelton Henderson?

03-00:07:33  
Coleman: No, Thelton Henderson didn't join, and neither did Norvel Smith. They --

03-00:07:38  
Rubens: Did you live at the fraternity, or did you --

03-00:07:39  
Coleman: No -- I did. I lived at the fraternity. It was on Haste Street. And then there was Wesley Johnson, who was a pharmacist, and he was from San Francisco. In fact, his brother and I were the two blacks that went to Boys State when I met the governor, and the governor said, "Oh, Gordon Coleman, how's your grandfather." There were about 200 kids there, at Boys State. So we kind of were in a social group together before we got to the University, and we stuck together.

03-00:08:10  
Rubens: While we were setting up, you were taking a look at Byron Rumford --

03-00:08:15  
Coleman: Byron Rumford, yeah --

03-00:08:16  
Rubens: -- and you told me, of course, that he mentioned your grandfather --

03-00:08:19  
Coleman: Yeah, he mentioned my uncle, because they went to Sac State together. My uncle couldn't get into Cal, so he goes to Meharry Medical School, but he went to Sacramento JC for two years, or whatever it is, and then -- boom! -- goes into medical school.

03-00:08:33  
Rubens: And then -- I think -- you told me -- so did you actually know Byron Rumford?

03-00:08:36  
Coleman: Yeah, I knew Byron Rumford, because he used to come by the house. My mother worked on his campaign when he ran for the assembly, and then they were working on the fair housing, they did some work together. In fact, there were on the YMCA board, and they did a lot of other stuff. And of course, Byron knew my grandfather, so, you know --

03-00:08:53  
Rubens: And didn't you tell me there was some intermarriage?

03-00:08:55  
Coleman: OK, yeah. Now, the other thing is my father died -- my father died when I was eight years old, my mother remarried two, three years later, and she married into the Dixon family, which was related to the Gordon family, and Betty Gordon and Walter Gordon were daughter and father -- I'm related to them by marriage, not blood. Walter Gordon was a student -- in fact, he was a

classmate of Earl Warren, and Walter Gordon played football here at the University of California. He made All American Consensus.

03-00:09:27

Rubens: Was he...

03-00:09:28

Coleman: You've got a book up there on the shelf about Walter Gordon. You've got to read that.

03-00:09:31

Rubens: Was he African American?

03-00:09:33

Coleman: Oh, yes. He was African American, and he was the judge -- he was appointed to the Appeal Board by Earl Warren, and he was the governor of the Virgin Islands for a period of time. He got into -- you know -- big politics. So we're related by marriage, not by blood, which is interesting, because when I start reading this, I start laughing about, oh, these people used to come in and out of my grandfather's house that I knew as a kid, and when I got older -- "Oh, yeah, I remember this person." And they had children, but they were -- in fact, they would baby-sit me when I was a little kid. So that's part of the thing.

03-00:10:13

Rubens: Well, I think it's important to amend this history to really bespeak the climate of Berkeley, which was not so open. I did want to ask you when you were talking with Thelton Henderson, or [having these beer fests?], I had asked you earlier if there was any particular discussion about the Supreme Court decision in '54, or was there any involvement in politics? Discussion about the NAACP?

03-00:10:42

Coleman: No. Well, yeah, the NAACP was something, but in those days, it wasn't the big issue. Brown vs. -- what is it, Ferguson or Madison? That hadn't happened, you see.

03-00:10:56

Rubens: Well, Brown vs. Board was '54.

03-00:10:58

Coleman: Board. OK. Yeah. But what we used to talk about was Port Chicago, see, and now the lead counsel for the black sailors was Thurgood Marshall, and one of the guys who was the defense counsel was -- I'm blocking his name. He was district attorney of Alameda County --

03-00:11:23

Rubens: Not Coakley...

03-00:11:25

Coleman: Was it Coakley?



03-00:11:26

Rubens: It could be. Could be Coakley.

03-00:11:27

Coleman: These guys were all in the Navy at the time, and they became -- later on -- and even this guy I went to high school, Delucchi -- he was an Italian fellow. I had an Italian girlfriend in high school, too.

03-00:11:44

Rubens: But you're saying in terms of any kind of real civil rights complaints about housing discrimination, or lack of African American faculty, this is not something that was on the agenda at these meetings?

03-00:11:55

Coleman: No, it wasn't on the agenda, because, see, one of the things when we were students here, we had a sense that the people -- the faculty -- we were a number. We didn't -- we were just a number. They didn't know us like they would know some of the other people, and the reason I say this is my mother worked across the street from the women's gymnasium -- the Hearst Gymnasium -- at a laboratory called the Holden Scott laboratory. Scott was a classmate of mine, Alan Scott. His mother was a partner, and I had a summer job of cleaning up in there and doing the windows, and buffing the floors, and taking care of the rabbits, and cleaning glassware, and all that sort of stuff.

03-00:12:38

Rubens: It's a private lab?

03-00:12:39

Coleman: It's a private lab. Now, they were Berkeley folks -- the Holdings. Earnest Holding was a minister, and he associated with -- I think it was a Community Baptist -- community church down on Fairville and Ellis, down in East Berkeley. Down by Shattuck, where it runs into Adeline? So in fact, Mrs. Holding and my mother drove across country back to Virginia when I was in high school. (laughter) So this lady whom my mother worked for, they drove across country, and they had a good time. So we were kind of family, and we didn't feel a thing. But you'd leave them and go into it, now the Scotts -- Alan Scott became a physician, went to school, we were classmates, and I forgot his sister's name -- Betty... Anyway, I knew them socially. Not socially, I knew them on the campus, but I knew them because I worked in their parents' shop, their private laboratory. And I was talking about going to dental school or medical school, and all that sort of stuff, and people said, "Well, you know, what kind of grades you got?" Well, I just said, "Such and such." Oh, OK, well, try. And these guys would get -- boom! -- right away, they'd get selected. And I'm figuring, I started -- "Oh, wait a minute. We had these same classes, what's going on here?" I would talk to the black students who wanted to, and had better grades than I did, and they said, "Hey, you're wasting your time. You better go to a black college -- a university, a medical school, or go back east, because you're not going to make it across the Bay, because there is -- " we felt -- a quota. We couldn't prove it, and I didn't find out until later on,

when I got out of the service, that they had a quota system over at UC. Now, pharmacy school was a little different, dental school and medical school was only so many students per year, or every two or three years, and that's how it was.

03-00:14:43

Rubens:

You also said to me when we hadn't been rolling yet that you learned later on there were a couple of guys who said really quite disparagingly they didn't want that n-word --

03-00:14:56

Coleman:

Oh, yeah. Well, when I was elected vice president of the class in public health, I had a friend -- and I'm blocking on his name -- but we studied together and he was Russian. In fact -- I'll think of his name. He's in my yearbook.

03-00:15:13

Rubens:

Well, we can add it later.

03-00:15:14

Coleman:

Yeah. But I used to study with him, and I stayed at the fraternity house, and then I'd go and he had an apartment down on College -- or a couple of rooms - - and he said, "Gordon, I've got to tell you." He said, "You're running for this office, but that's your thing, you're more of a politician than the rest of us, because I want to do something else." He said, "On this election that's coming up, some of the guys in the class don't want you because you're black." And he said, "You know they got that..." I said, "Yeah, OK, the good old n-word." He said, "Yeah. I don't want that black or that nigger going to be in there. He said, 'I don't want him representing me.'" And the guy said, "Well, why don't you run?" And he said, "Well, I don't have time for that sort of stuff, but I'll let somebody else do it." And I figured, "What's going on?" He says, "You don't get it, do you?" And I figured, "Well, I guess I'd been protected." And my friend Art Martinsen says, "Yeah, Gordon, you have been protected." He said, "But you know, great. You're in the military, you're going to do your thing." He said, "Remember what Dr. Mangold said." Professor Mangold -- School of Public Health, was the department head for environmental health, which was called -- in those days -- sanitation, which is the health inspector. He said to me two weeks before I graduated, and I guess I didn't (inaudible) before. He called me in the office, and said, "Gordon," he said, "You know, you're going to graduate, and get your degree in this." And he said, "We gave a presentation for all the local people in the area, all the Health Departments in the area." And he said, "I don't know where you're going to get a job." I said, "I beg your pardon, sir." He said, "I don't know where you're going to get a job." And I said, "Well, what about the Health Departments?" He said, "They're not going to hire you." I said, "Well, in that case, I'm going in the military, because I've got to..." You know -- I signed up, and Korea was just winding down. He said, "Well, do that." And he says, "Hopefully, it'll change." And he said, "The reason I am saying this to you, do you remember last semester, we had summer jobs pop up, and the city of Berkeley asked me

for recommend some students in my class to go down and take the job, to show up for a job." And he said, "Oh, yeah." So he said, "I made the recommendation, I said, 'Yeah, I've got four or five students in my class,' and they've got a position for one guy to do such and such." So, smart me, soon as he said it, the class broke, I ran down there. I go in there, and I talk to the people in environmental health in the Health Department, and said, "I'm a student of Dr. Mangold's and I'm here for the job." He said, "Oh, they job's been filled." Oh. OK. So I left. Come back, go in the lab, and my lab partner -- we were working around, and one of the guys wasn't there. So the next day, I said, "Hey, what happened to you?" I said, "We had this lab experiment, and we needed your stuff." He said, "Oh, I went down to apply for that job that Mangold..." I said, "Oh, yeah. I did, too." He said, "Yeah, I got it." I said, "When did you get it?" He said, "I got it today." "Wait a minute. I was there the day before, and they told me it was filled." And he said, "Gordon, I don't know what to say." So I related this to Dr. Professor Mangold. He said, "Well, that's part of what I was trying to get across to you." I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'm going to go in the military, and I'll do my thing." So I go off to the military, come back out of Korea -- I wrote him a letter while I was there. In fact, most of us guys wrote to people. And when I came back, he was just ecstatic. He said, "Oh." He said, "I really appreciate you writing a letter to me about what your experiences were." And I then had to go up to Fort Lewis, Washington for a year before they discharged me. While I was up there, I was assigned as the preventive medicine officer and the environmental engineer for the post, the Northwest, and I worked with the local people in the Canadian government. And one of my jobs was -- since I was the junior office, I just got promoted to First Lieutenant -- that I had to teach school in the local community. (laughter) And this is a place called Tillicum. It's DuPont -- the town of DuPont. The building's still there. Once, twice a week, I had to go into the grammar school for the semester -- yeah, two semesters -- and teach them basic washing your hands, food preparation, and all that sort of stuff, because that was the job. Also, King County -- which was in the area of Tacoma -- the Health Department wanted some support military for mosquito control, and rats, and all that. So, I was the representative. I had to go sit on the board. So, I'd go in and sit on the board, and do all that stuff, and then I wrote back, and I said, "Hey, I'm getting out, and I wanted to apply for a job in Alameda County." So, the personnel director from there called down and said, "We've got a person who wants to apply for the job."

03-00:20:43

Rubens:

Personnel director from the Army?

03-00:20:44

Coleman:

No. Personnel director from King County called the personnel director in Alameda County, said, "I saw you've got a brochure that there's an environmental health position coming open, and I've got a candidate for you." And he said, "You know, well, the exam -- send it up to me, and I'll monitor the exam, and do all this for it." OK. So, two or three weeks later, the guy

called, he said, "Oh, Gordon, we got the exam. Do you want to come in and take it?" So, I asked my boss, "Major, can I go up and...?" He said, "Oh, go. Go right ahead." So, I go up there, and he puts me in the corner of the room, and he's on the telephone, and he says, "Here, here's the exam. Fill it out. You know." After an hour, I'm finished. He said, "You're finished?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, you know, you've got another hour and a half -- " I mean, you got an hour and a half for the exam, but I did it in 40 minutes, or something like that. He looked at it, and he said, "Oh, you got a couple things." He said, "I want you to go back and relook at questions da, da, da, da." OK, so I went back and looked at it, and I figured, "He's telling me to go back and look at it, so obviously he's..." So, I looked at the thing, and I changed some answers. Gave it back to him, sealed it up, sent it off, and I said, "Well, that's over." He said, "Hey, you did very well." I said, "Oh, I did?" He said, "Yeah, I scored you." He said, "You got 97%." I said, "Oh, gee, thanks." He said, "You know, we like you working -- the school board has said, 'We like what you've done for these kids,' and I work with you on mosquito problems." And we had an oyster issue at Gray Harbor in the county, there, and a veterinarian and I would go out and do environmental issues, and try to help the oysters. What they were doing is getting contamination, and I found the source from the sewer line. I was doing what I was taught in the University here. So, he said, "You know, we like you. If you don't get the job down there, come back up here one of these days, and you always have a job here in the place." And I said, "OK." So I come back, see Professor Mangold, and said, "Oh, I'm working for the Alameda County." He says, "Oh, good." He said, "I was hoping you'd get a job at Alameda County," he said, "Because they just absorbed the city of Oakland," and he said, "You'll be the first black hired in this position." Now, they had a guy who came in from New York, but he was grandfathered in as a political thing in the city of Oakland, and when they took over -- the county took over all of it, every city except Berkeley. Berkeley wanted its own Health Department. And he said, "You don't have good rapport with Berkeley." In fact, the two Japanese guys, myself -- all the minority guys would take exams in San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley, and in our class, Harry Manji would either be one, I would be number two, and there was a guy named Chris Scriptos. The three of us would rotate between one, two, and three, every exam we took, we'd be the one, two and three.

03-00:24:01

Rubens:

This is when you were an undergraduate?

03-00:24:03

Coleman:

Undergrads. And we still continued doing this, and we would go take exams in the city of Berkeley, Oakland, and these other places --

03-00:24:11

Rubens:

For job placements?

03-00:24:12  
Coleman: For jobs, while we were students here, and we'd either be one, two, and three, and they would always hire in house, or a guy who was four, five, and six.

03-00:24:22  
Rubens: These guys you mentioned --

03-00:24:23  
Coleman: They're still alive.

03-00:24:24  
Rubens: But were they African American?

03-00:24:25  
Coleman: No. Japanese. Scriptos -- European, whatever it is, and me. So, one black, one Asian, and one -- whatever. I think he was Greek. Chris Scriptos, yeah. But he said, "I'm not going there, because I'm going to go back and get my degree." He went back, got a PhD in biology, and is teaching up in Oregon.

03-00:24:48  
Rubens: OK. So, let's do this, though. You in fact went to Alameda, and got the job?

03-00:24:53  
Coleman: Yeah, I went and got the job.

03-00:24:53  
Rubens: There was no problem?

03-00:24:55  
Coleman: No. Hey, I came back from up north, got the job, was the first black hired, and they were happy as hell, because myself and Harry Manji -- who was the other guy, who he went to Korea, too, it turns out -- we came back and we started doing all sorts of stuff --

03-00:25:13  
Rubens: So tell me what the position was called --

03-00:25:14  
Coleman: Oh, it was an environmental health. Oh, it was a sanitarian, which now is called an environmental health specialist.

03-00:25:20  
Rubens: You were called a sanitary specialist?

03-00:25:21  
Coleman: No, environmental -- oh, sanitarian. Yeah. S-A-N -- sanitarian.

03-00:25:26  
Rubens: And was that a pretty good paid job, for what it was?

03-00:25:29  
Coleman: Oh, hey, hey. It was equal to that of a nurse -- a beginning nurse --

03-00:25:35

Rubens: Where was your office with them?

03-00:25:36

Coleman: Oh, in Oakland.

03-00:25:38

Rubens: Where literally?

03-00:25:39

Coleman: Oh, it was down on 9th Street. Then they moved to Alameda -- the city of Alameda -- and the office -- they tore it down, and they built the new Health Department on 499 5th Street.

03-00:25:55

Rubens: And so let's project --

03-00:25:57

Coleman: And that's where I was, there. That's where I got the job, and I started working there.

03-00:26:01

Rubens: And no other African Americans were...

03-00:26:04

Coleman: That was it. I was it. Until -- I'd been there about five years, and they hired another one. Well, they had African Americans there, but they were the janitors --

03-00:26:11

Rubens: Secretaries, or --

03-00:26:12

Coleman: -- the janitors, or not even -- no, not secretaries. Clerks. And Dr. Malcolm, after I got there, started a group called Intergroup, which had to do with ethnicity and race, and we had to meet once a month, and everybody had to attend, and if you didn't attend, they dinged you -- they docked you a pay -- and we talked about how to get along with people, and we talked about race, and all that sort of stuff, which a lot of people didn't like, but he forced the issue, because he got a grant called, "Inner Cities," from Ford Foundation, and he got all these social grants to do all these different projects throughout the county. And there's West Oakland, East Oakland, North Oakland, and Fremont, and all that sort of stuff. He built a good working -- in fact, the Health Department, when he was here -- he was a health officer -- in the state, we were rated number two or three behind Los Angeles County, for health care in the sense of nursing and environmental health, because we came up with different programs on how to deal with rat control, how to deal with food issues, and how to deal with industrial hygiene issues, and occupational health. And that's what I got into. I started doing all that stuff, to the point that after I'd been there a while, I started -- well, I went back to grad school. My

mother got sick, I went back to dental school, and came back in the county, and got into industrial hygiene, institutions, so -- oh, I guess in the late sixties, early seventies, I started doing institutional inspections, and was picked by the governor -- shouldn't have said that. I forgot his name.

03-00:28:20

Rubens: [Jerry?]?

03-00:28:21

Coleman: No. The Republican.

03-00:28:23

Rubens: Before him?

03-00:28:23

Coleman: Before him.

03-00:28:26

Rubens: Well, Knight --

03-00:28:27

Coleman: No. After Knight.

03-00:28:28

Rubens: Goodwin Knight... and -- oh, I know who you mean. I can't think of his name, either. Ronald Reaga

03-00:28:37

Coleman: Deukmejian. Deukmejian. Yeah, I worked on Deukmejian -- well, the sheriff - - no, Reagan, I remember Reagan. What happened was I came out from Korea, worked after I came out of dental school, came back and quit, they assigned me to Santa Rita, and while I was at Santa Rita, I met the sheriff -- I met all these sheriffs. Well, the military and the police departments are kind of paramedics -- paramilitary. They understand structure, command structure, and all that kind of stuff, and they wanted me to go through and inspect all the jails. Well, I inspected all the jails in the county.

03-00:29:26

Rubens: What year are we talking about?

03-00:29:28

Coleman: From the time I got there. '59 until I retired. So, from '59 until I retired, I started inspecting the jails in the city -- the cells in the city, and then the big county. I started doing that, and what happened was they wanted me to make an inspection. I did an inspection of Santa Rita, which was terrible, and the commander who was running it, says, "Well, hey, I don't like the report you're writing. I want you to change some of this." I figured, "Woah, time out. You telling me you want me to kind of skew this report so it doesn't look so bad?" I figured no, no, no, no, no. Uh-uh, I'm not doing that. So I went to the commander who ran Santa Rita, a guy named Tommy Houchins, who I had

met, and lo and behold, this guy was a Marine pilot, and he had been in Korea the same time I was, and we talked about this, and we got along very well. And he said, "Gordon, you do what you've got to do. I'll deal with this issue." And he said, "You know, you're really good at this." He said, "I'm going to make a recommendation that every so years, we're going to review the jail standards," and he got the whatever, and the next thing I knew, I got this letter from Deukmejian's office asking would I come in and help write some standards, from the standpoint of internal problems in the jail -- the physical structure, the size of the cell, the lighting, the heating, the food, the whole -- for the prisoners. So, I got into that on the Board of Corrections, and for two years, I wrote inspection standards, and became part of the team to teach -- and we traveled up and down the state to every county to teach the people in the county how to conduct an inspection, and what the standards were for the jails. So I made a name for that, which means I got something from the National Penal -- no, National Jail Commission. The state standards are not the same as the federal standards. They're different. And of course --

03-00:31:52

Rubens:

You were looking at counties.

03-00:31:53

Coleman:

Yeah, I was working for counties. So I got to be an expert witness, and they asked me to do some work over at San Quentin privately, and I said, well, I had never done it before, but then I checked around and found out it was a very lucrative business, and how much I would charge an hour, and they said, well, they didn't want to do that. I said, "Well, I'm sorry. I'm not going to bother. I'll stay right here in my county, doing what I'm doing, and going up and down the state." As a result, whenever I had to go on a jury duty trial that had anything to do with the police department, or stuff like that, the judge would start questioning me, and I told him what I did, and how I worked with the sheriff and the police, and he said, "Well, you're too much -- you are qualified as an expert witness; we do not want you to sit on the jury." So I can't sit on a criminal case, in most cases.

03-00:32:44

Rubens:

That's a perfect segue to something I want to ask you. Byron Rumford is -- I think he gets in the legislature -- in the assembly -- in '59 or '60. He has the campaign for fair housing in '63, and then '64, everything kind of breaks loose here. There's the demonstrations in '63 and '64 on Auto Row, there was (inaudible), there's the free speech movement, all those students they had to process through Santa Rita, and finally one more thing. There really is this budding awakening amongst the whites in Oakland, and they're finally listening to what African Americans have been saying for a long time, that there's a disproportionate numbers of African Americans in jails, that they're not sitting on the juries, that all sorts of things. So, were you aware of that in the county jails?



03-00:33:43  
Coleman:

Mm-hmm. I would go in the jails in the county and through the state, and I'd recognize some of these people. I knew a lot of these guys who were in jail. In particular in Alameda County. I grew up with these kids. And the sheriff would say, "Don't go in there." He said, "But you go in there with a jailer." He said, "But, you know, do your job, but don't talk to these people." And the first time I went in Santa Rita, I walked in the door, and the guy said, "Gordon, what are you doing here?" And the jailer said, "What?" I said, "Oh, I know this guy. Hey, hi!" He said, "Wait a minute!" So I walked over, started talking to the guy. I said, "Oh, I'm here to do the inspection. Such and such, and thus and such, and this and this." And guard got -- "Oh, wait a minute. You can't do that." I said, "Wait a minute. Hey. I'm doing the inspection for the county, but the bottom line was my report went to two places. It went to the attorney general -- unvarnished -- and it went to the county health officer." I said, "So, that's the system."

03-00:34:50  
Rubens:

And were you noticing that there was --

03-00:34:52  
Coleman:

Oh, I noticed at that time, and I started talking to the people, and I would -- usually, they would go in and make an inspection and in and out in 20 minutes, half an hour at the most. I'd spend half the day to a whole day, which was unheard of. The guy said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, hey, I'm inspecting the place and checking it out." And then I'd sit down with the jailer and the sheriff, and say, "OK. These are my findings. What is it I can do to help you make it better?"

03-00:35:22  
Rubens:

I want to ask if you if some of the findings were that there was racial discrimination.

03-00:35:26  
Coleman:

Well, no. I never got into discrimination. I just said, "You know, I got a bad feeling. I don't like the way your guards are treating the prisoners."

03-00:35:34  
Rubens:

The guards at that point were all white.

03-00:35:36  
Coleman:

You've got that right. And he looked at me. I said, "Do you hear what I'm saying? I don't like the attitude of some of these guys, but -- "

03-00:35:46  
Rubens:

So, I need to move this along just a little here and ask you what year did you stop going into Santa Rita? Did you do that --

03-00:35:55  
Coleman:

Oh, I did it until I retired. I'm still doing it. But the other thing is I got involved with the Black Panther Party.

03-00:36:03

Rubens:

That's just what I wanted to ask. How did that come about?

03-00:36:06

Coleman:

Well, that came about because I had just graduated from Command and General Staff School, and that's my military stuff -- you want to find out what I talked about, yeah, I'll get to that. But the thing that happened was these guys went to this -- the church that they went to was down on 27th and West Street. It was St. Augustine Episcopal Church.

03-00:36:30

Rubens:

Which guys went there?

03-00:36:31

Coleman:

That's where the Black Panther Party started their -- they used to meet in the basement, and it was by -- I forgot the priest's name. Baskerville, or what's his name. Anyway. They met there, and I went down there to say, "Hey, guys, I understand what you're doing. You're trying to -- the community -- I can help you. I can talk to you about the military." And they said, "We don't trust you." I said, "What do you mean?" "We don't trust you -- " Well, I went in there with another friend of mine, and we were just two black guys who'd just graduated from Command and General Staff School, and I said, "You know, -  
- "

03-00:37:13

Rubens:

Who was the other guy?

03-00:37:14

Coleman:

The other guy died. His name is Elmond Elmore -- Colonel Elmond Elmore. He died. But we had just graduated from the thing, and it turned out -- and I said, "Part of what they taught us was how to go in and occupy an area, or a city, or a country, and what are some of the first things you do and what you don't do, if you're going to try to influence the populace -- or the indigenous personnel, as we called them." And I said, "I can tell you -- we can help you do the planning." "No, no, no." "OK, fine." So we walked away, and they got involved in the Watts Riots, and of course you know what happened there. (splat noise) The city goes up. And I figured, "Dumb, dumb, dumb." In fact, when they had the riots here in Berkeley --

03-00:38:02

Rubens:

Which riots?

03-00:38:05

Coleman:

People's Park. I was teaching a class in the Oakland Army Base, and the guys in the class were the National Guards, and all that sort of stuff, and we told them how to put down riots, and how to do this, and how to do that, and blah, blah, blah. I had gone up to -- I was on active duty up at Fort Lewis, came back -- my wife and the family picked me up at the airport, and they said, "The city's under siege." I said, "What the hell are you talking about?" She said, "There's a big riot about the People's Park." And I figured, "Oh, my

God." Got in the car, and the city was cordoned off -- you couldn't drive through. I was in uniform coming back, and I stopped at the Berkeley border, and lo and behold, all the sheriffs that I knew -- I said, "Get me the watch commander," and the guy walks up. He says, "What the hell are you doing here, Gordon?" I said, "I'm going home. I live here. What the hell are you guys doing here?" He said, "Oh, these damn hippies up here doing all this stuff, and you know we had this big thing." And my wife says, "Yeah, I got caught in the middle of it." I figured, "What?" Anyway, I go home, go to work the next day, because I came off of active duty, go to work the next day and start finding out what's happening. I called Tommy Houchins, and said, you know. He said, "Yeah, we talked about how to do this." And I said, "Yeah, I remember discussing this with you." He said, "Well, the city of Berkeley couldn't handle it, so they called the Sheriff's Department, and we went in and occupied it, and we put in tear gas." I said, "And what did you use?" And he told me. I said, "Damn it! You guys know better than that!" Because I was part of the group that said, "If you're going to do that, you don't use this suppressant, because the wind currents in downtown Berkeley and by the University is not going to work for you guys," and what it did was come off of Telegraph and went through the public schools -- my kid got caught in it. My wife was downtown at Eddie's, having lunch and ice cream with the kids, and the guy said, "Lady, don't go out there. Go out the back door." And they got her out, and the kids out, and then I talked to the chemical officer, and he hung his head. I said, "Don't talk to me." I said, "You're just on my shit list, and you're going to say there, because remember we talked about what you need to do, the kind of chemicals?" There's three phrases of tear gas that you use to put down a riot, and you used the worst one in the world.

03-00:40:43

Rubens:

So let me ask you this, and then we've got to get to the military. Did you ever have any other contact with the Panthers?

03-00:40:49

Coleman:

No. They didn't trust me. They didn't trust me because --

03-00:40:50

Rubens:

OK. OK. And tell me about also when Lionel Wilson was running for mayor -  
-

03-00:40:57

Coleman:

OK, now Lionel Wilson -- I knew him before he became mayor, because I used to go to the YMCA and we used to play basketball together. And then he got married -- I forgot his wife's name. She's a lawyer. Brunette. Anyway, he ran -- Josh Rose was the first black person elected to the City Council --

03-00:41:22

Rubens:

Of Oakland.

03-00::

Coleman: -- and he was the secretary -- yeah, of Oakland. And Lionel Wilson came behind him, and they set up this machine, and us guys would help work on the campaign. I didn't get too involved in it, because Lionel Wilson used to play tennis, and I played some tennis with him down at the deFremery Park, so we knew each other. And he got some political ambitions, and I figured, "Well, I'm not interested in politics at this point." And he then became mayor, and started instituting and changing a lot of the stuff --

03-00:41:51

Rubens: And Panthers did help out a lot.

03-00:41:54

Coleman: And the Panthers helped out. Yeah, see --

03-00:41:55

Rubens: With that election. How did people feel down at your Public Health Office? Do you remember any --

03-00:41:59

Coleman: Oh, the Panthers -- hey, as far as we were concerned --

03-00:42:01

Rubens: Not about the Panthers. About Lionel Wilson. Was there some --

03-00:42:05

Coleman: Hey, no. This was fine. He was fine, because -- see, Lionel Wilson was a judge. He gave up the judgeship, or he retired to become a mayor, a politician. Now, Dr. Malcolm -- the health officer was a real forward thinking guy, because he felt --

03-00:42:22

Rubens: Where had he come from again?

03-00:42:24

Coleman: Dr. Malcolm?

03-00:42:24

Rubens: Yeah.

03-00:42:27

Coleman: He went to medical school in Chicago -- no, in St. Louis. I don't know where he --

03-00:42:31

Rubens: He was the one who kind of administered that Ford grant.

03-00:42:34

Coleman: Yeah. Yeah.

03-00:42:34

Rubens: That Ford grant was so big to Oakland, it's really --

03-00:42:37  
Coleman:

Yeah, and I'm trying to think of the name of it. It's called Model Cities, or -- not Model Cities. Before Model Cities. But, no, he was a forward thinking guy, because he believed in diversification. In fact, he hired the first black secretary of a department in the county. So, I became -- not one of his task force, but people, when they'd have issues of diversification, I was always involved with Dr. Malcolm, and there was a guy named Barney Hillburn, who was elected to the school board in the city of Oakland, and he was an elected official, so he -- there was Barney Hillburn, myself, and Leon Miller who taught VD -- VD Control -- at the Public Health. But he was not a Cal man.

03-00:43:30  
Rubens:

OK. So, in terms of just actual direct involvement in Oakland politics, that was not --

03-00:43:36  
Coleman:

I didn't get into that.

03-00:43:36  
Rubens:

And you lived in Berkeley?

03-00:43:38  
Coleman:

I lived in Berkeley. I was living in Oakland during this time, and then when I got married in '62, I moved to Berkeley. See, by that time, most of the stuff was all over with. Well, no it wasn't. I wasn't into politics here in Oakland.

03-00:43:51  
Rubens:

Here either. Let me just review a couple of things. There was the emergence of the BCA, Berkeley Community Alliance. There was Don Hopkins, who was involved with the Democratic party. Then there were -- later on, there was D'Army Bailey --

03-00:44:13  
Coleman:

Oh, those idiots. Those guys --

03-00:44:15  
Rubens:

And Gus Newport. You weren't --

03-00:44:17  
Coleman:

(huffs) I couldn't --

03-00:44:19  
Rubens:

We'll just leave that alone.

03-00:44:19  
Coleman:

Yeah, those guys... Yeah, they -- their politics didn't meet my politics, because my politics was a little more conservative, like be responsible for what you're doing.

03-00:44:29  
Rubens: OK. So let's now get parallel to this development, how you became involved with the Oakland Army Base, how you started teaching.

03-00:44:37  
Coleman: OK. How much time?

03-00:44:39  
Rubens: I think we started -- we had one --

03-00:44:41  
Coleman: How much time do we have left?

03-00:44:42  
Rubens: I only need a little tiny bit of that. Well, we can change tapes, too.

03-00:44:45  
Coleman: No, no. I mean, do you have to change tapes? How much time do you have left?

03-00:44:49  
Rubens: We've got -- let's do ten minutes on this, and then we'll change tapes.

03-00:44:52  
Coleman: OK, because change tapes, and I have to go to the bathroom.

03-00:44:54  
Rubens: Oh, OK. Do you want me to stop? Well, let's go ten minutes. Can you wait? Or do you want to go? I don't want you to...

03-00:45:04  
Coleman: Well, let me go to the bathroom.

03-00:45:06  
Rubens: We'll just stop. We'll just completely stop. I was asking you about Byron Rumford, but he had gotten pretty involved -- yeah, he had a pharmacy down -  
-

03-00:45:19  
Coleman: On Sacramento.

03-00:45:19  
Rubens: -- but he also got involved in something called the Appomattox Club?

03-00:45:24  
Coleman: Yeah, I didn't -- I heard about that, but I didn't know anything about that. Yeah, I heard my mother talk about that, but I didn't know too much --

03-00:45:34  
Rubens: So in terms of actually when we were talking about a lot of these things were going on -- the sit ins at Auto Row --

03-00:45:42  
Coleman: See, I didn't get involved in that.

03-00:45:43  
Rubens: You were doing your work through the county --

03-00:45:46  
Coleman: The county. I was doing my work for the county, and, see, part of the problem -- I guess part of the thing with the Panthers, they didn't trust me because they said, "Well, Gordon, you married a white lady." I said, "Yeah, what's that got to do with it?" "Well, you're not black enough."

03-00:46:02  
Rubens: Oh, there was a lot of that.

03-00:46:03  
Coleman: And I said, "You know -- "

03-00:46:05  
Rubens: You got both ends. Because you were black, you weren't getting jobs in the early days, and then --

03-00:46:09  
Coleman: Yeah. But then I said, "You guys, don't run that stuff by me. Bobby Seale -- " I said, "You know, the Panther Party was founded by Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and a Japanese guy, which is not public."

03-00:46:28  
Rubens: Aoki.

03-00:46:29  
Coleman: You've got it. And I've talked to people about it, and I figured, "Hey, what about Richard?" "What are you talking about?" I've even confronted Bobby Seale the last time I talked to him about -- yeah, Bobby Seale's still alive, because he came to the museum. And I said, "Who was the third guy?" "I don't know what you're talking about." I said, "Yeah, well." I said, "When you guys were going to Laney College, I knew what you were doing, so when I approached you guys to help you, you were going to give me the cold shoulder." I said, "Now, you're living down on Lake Shore. You've got a penthouse up on the top floor. Who's paying for it?" You know who is paying for it? Well, never mind.

03-00:47:12  
Rubens: Do you mean Bobby's, or do you mean --

03-00:47:13  
Coleman: The Panther Party had a penthouse on the top floor.

03-00:47:15  
Rubens: Yeah, that was where Huey Newton --

03-00:47:17  
Coleman: Huey Newton.

03-00:47:21  
Rubens: Who was paying for it?

03-00:47:23  
Coleman: Hanoi Jane.

03-00:47:25  
Rubens: Oh.

03-00:47:26  
Coleman: You know who Hanoi Jane was?

03-00:47:27  
Rubens: Yeah, Jane...

03-00:47:28  
Coleman: Fonda.

03-00:47:30  
Rubens: OK. You were outside that...

03-00:47:34  
Coleman: I was outside of that stuff because I was raising a family, so I was saying, "OK, guys. I'm going to do my thing."

03-00:47:40  
Rubens: OK. So let's now get your connection...

03-00:47:43  
Coleman: To the Army base. Now, I left Fort Lewis in '59, was discharged, came back, went to the Presidio, and said, "The one thing I learned at Cal, and from my buddies here is don't give up your commission. Keep your Army commission." Which means you get into the Reserve program or the National Guard. So I start checking around, and come to find out they don't want any blacks in the National Guard. Now, Rumford, while he was in the Assembly, passed the first bill integrating the National Guards. So I figured, well, I don't have any friends in the National Guard, don't know anybody with any clout, so let me stick with the regular Army, and get into --

03-00:48:31  
Rubens: You knew Rumford, but you just didn't think you --

03-00:48:33  
Coleman: Well, I don't know if he had enough clout with the -- see, I was unaware that he had done all this pushing, because, see, Truman didn't pass his bill until -- what? '50 -- no, it was -- the desegregation of the military was '48. But the military, like everything else, they took their time implementing it.



03-00:48:56

Rubens: Why did you go to the Presidio instead of Oakland?

03-00:48:58

Coleman:

Well, the Presidio was the Six Army Headquarters, and the headquarters of all the Reserves. So I figured I'd learned enough by being on the staff -- being the only black on the staff in Korea in this regiment -- that the way to do it is you got to the flagpole -- which is headquarters. I went in there, and said, "I just came out, and I just had this recommendation from the surgeon up in For Lewis, and the commander," and that I was looking for a home. I was First Lieutenant -- "I mean, I'm bottom of the pile. I know you're always needing bodies." So, he said, "Well, we've got one opening on Pill Hill." "OK." So I went over to Pill Hill, and they were looking for bodies, and then they said, "OK, we assigned you." And then the next thing, they transferred us from Pill Hill down to the Oakland Army Base.

03-00:49:56

Rubens: And what was the unit?

03-00:49:57

Coleman:

Oh, the unit was the 352nd General Hospital. Thousand-bed general hospital - - 1,000 beds. I mean, they could take 1,000 patients at any one time. And there were a lot of blacks there, but I'm thinking -- two blacks. No, one black, and she was a nurse. And I was the other one. And they were --

03-00:50:25

Rubens: Not a lot of blacks were there.

03-00:50:27

Coleman:

Well, enlisted people, but for the officer staff, there was one nurse, and her name was Ferguson, and she moved to Hawaii. And the rest of them were doctors and nurses. And I mean, hey, these guys -- the doctors were the cream of the crop. They were working at Highland Hospital, they were working at Pill Hill, they were working at Providence Hospital. I mean, these guys --

03-00:50:52

Rubens: So let me just get this. There's a unit called the 352 General Hospital. And how many people belonged to that unit?

03-00:51:00

Coleman: OK, I got to be the detachment commander, and I had -- I was responsible for roughly 300 enlisted people, and the --

03-00:51:12

Rubens: All reservists?

03-00:51:13

Coleman: Yeah, all reservists.

03-00:51:15

Rubens: Is that what you started out?

03-00:51:16  
Coleman: Yeah, that's where I started out.

03-00:51:18  
Rubens: What did it mean to be the head of the detachment all of the sudden?

03-00:51:21  
Coleman: Well, OK, no. I came in as the training officer, and after a couple of years, I worked myself up to be the detachment commander. I was the commanding officer of all -- my responsibility was all the enlisted people. Fed, clothed, paid, did the whole nine yards. That was my job.

03-00:51:40  
Rubens: OK, I've got to get a picture of this. So, you're working at the County Health Department, --

03-00:51:44  
Coleman: I'm working at the County Health Department, --

03-00:51:46  
Rubens: -- you're living in Oakland, --

03-00:51:46  
Coleman: -- I'm living in Oakland, --

03-00:51:47  
Rubens: When do you go to the base and how? Just answer.

03-00:51:51  
Coleman: OK. I'm transferred on paper, and I go there once every other week and a weekend, and it was eight four-hours.

03-00:52:04  
Rubens: And when, once every other week? That was after work?

03-00:52:07  
Coleman: After work, yeah. After work.

03-00:52:09  
Rubens: And did you change into your --

03-00:52:10  
Coleman: I changed into uniform. And then two weeks out of the year, we went on military training.

03-00:52:16  
Rubens: So tell me, those first couple of years when you got in there, what did it look like? What did it feel like?

- 03-00:52:18  
Coleman: Those first couple of years, when I got in there, what did it look like? I was at the bottom of the totem pole, and everybody ignored me, except when they had some dirty job and some nasty jobs, guess what? I got the job.
- 03-00:52:32  
Rubens: Like what?
- 03-00:52:33  
Coleman: Well, "This room's got to be cleared of all the trash. You take a detail, and it's your job to clean it up." OK? And I usually ended up having all the minority troops to clean it up. OK? And the thing is, they want to see how much they can shove at you, and how much you would take it, and how you would deal with the issue. And then once you did that job well, well then they would elevate you up. And after two years of doing all of the -- as we call it -- ash and trash stuff: maintenance stuff, the stuff that nobody wants. They said, "OK. We'll now make you an assistant training officer. You have a desk, and now you start doing paper work." OK?
- 03-00:53:17  
Rubens: So what building were you in?
- 03-00:53:19  
Coleman: It's a warehouse building, and it's still there, and I'm trying to remember the name or number.
- 03-00:53:23  
Rubens: (inaudible)
- 03-00:53:25  
Coleman: Yeah. It's a warehouse. It's still there.
- 03-00:53:27  
Rubens: So, you would go there, Building 590.
- 03-00:53:28  
Coleman: I'd go there twice a month at night, and on weekends, and then two weeks a year, once a year, we would go for a total of two weeks. We'd go to some camp.
- 03-00:53:43  
Rubens: How many hours? Where would you get dinner?
- 03-00:53:46  
Coleman: Wouldn't. I'd leave home, grab a bite somewhere, and then go down there, and spent until it was -- I've got all my orders. I'll have to dig that out. I'll have to dig it out, but I'm trying to remember. It was -- 6:00 to 10:00, something like that.
- 03-00:54:08  
Rubens: What was the Army base like, '59, '60?

03-00:54:10  
Coleman:

OK. The Army base was like, in that -- see, now, Vietnam started later on, but it was a down time, and things weren't going -- no, it was... Militarily-wise, they were trying to train us in case of a disaster or war, because that was the point.

03-00:54:37  
Rubens:

And what was the point. That's why you were prepared to set up a hospital?

03-00:54:41  
Coleman:

A thousand-bed. And then they would rotate me through. Once I was a training officer, when I got that, then they would put me in how to set up a pharmacy, and then how to set up an operating room, and how to supply this, and how to take care of the trucks, and how to take care of the housing of all the people. In practice, I was the guy who took care of all the housing, the maintenance, and the training and transportation of all of the nurses, the doctors, and the troops. So we had roughly -- TO and E, which is called Table of Organization and Equipment, TDA, or Table of Distribution and Allowance.

03-00:55:20  
Rubens:

Say it again.

03-00:55:21  
Coleman:

Table of -- TO and E -- Table of Organization and Equipment. T O and E. And this would tell you how many people you had, how many guns, how many pencils, how many pieces of paper --

03-00:55:32  
Rubens:

Why "E"? It should be "A."

03-00:55:34  
Coleman:

Equipment.

03-00:55:35  
Rubens:

Equipment.

03-00:55:36  
Coleman:

(laughter) Well, I call it -- we chop. Table of Organization and Equipment, or Organization, something like, yeah. And what we would do is we would go there, pull out the stuff, and then start training the people, and it's a training, so your stenographer would send you down, and give you a new typewriter, and then you'd have to type out orders, and you'd have to get proficient. You'd have to type so many words a minute, and if you didn't, you'd practice. That's all you did. And then we got in a new camera, so you'd have to learn how to run the camera. And then once you got good, then you would have to teach the next person, and that's how the system works. You learn it. When you get very good at it, then you teach it, and you learn it better. And then once you do that, then you get an assistant, and you start training the assistant to go through this sort of stuff.

03-00:56:25

Rubens: So, you liked doing this?

03-00:56:27

Coleman: Oh! Well, one of the things -- when I got to Cal, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a chemist, and I figured, "Chemistry... I don't know." So I went to the -- what do they call it? -- counseling service, and they gave me a battery of tests --

03-00:56:46

Rubens: Are we talking about when you originally came to Cal?

03-00:56:47

Coleman: Yeah, yeah. In the fifties. And they said, "Hey, you shouldn't be a chemist, because you don't have the personality for it. What you need to be is a teacher." And I said, "I don't want to be a teacher! I don't want to be a teacher!" But I ended up being a teacher, because I get in the military, and I become a trainer, and because a trainer -- what do you train? You're teaching people how to do stuff -- different acronyms, different ways -- and I got good at it.

03-00:57:13

Rubens: And you liked it?

03-00:57:14

Coleman: I liked it, but then I also wanted to learn certain things specialty. I still couldn't get rid of the chemistry, so I got into industrial hygiene, about chemistry. Well, I would come into this place and tell you -- I can check the ventilation system, I can check the lighting, I can tell you how much air's moving through this place, I can tell you what kind of chemicals you've got in there --

03-00:57:34

Rubens: You learned that in classes?

03-00:57:35

Coleman: I learned that in classes, but once I got into military -- in the County Health Department -- I started specializing in that, and then they started sending me to school for that.

03-00:57:46

Rubens: Where would school be?

03-00:57:47

Coleman: Well, locally. They'd have these conferences, and they'd tell you how to do this. But the military was doing the same thing all along, but I was doing it on a more frequent basis. Now, after I got into the hospital, and became the detachment commander, we'd go on training, and how was it? Every ethnic, racial problem, I got. They dumped it to me. "Gordon, here's a problem. Fix it."

03-00:58:19

Rubens: Give me an example.

03-00:58:22

Coleman: "We've got two or three guys who have broken in and stole stuff, OK? And there's who blacks and a white. You deal with the blacks, and I'll deal with the white."

03-00:58:37

Rubens: So, what would you do?

03-00:58:40

Coleman: Well, I would interview all three of the people, found out who was responsible, write the report up the way it happened, give it to the Commander, and he'd look at it, and he would deduct (laughter) things he didn't like out of it. Of course, he's signing it. Not me. And he would go out and punish these people.

03-00:59:00

Rubens: Now, were you finding that there were any other instructors that were African American, or were you the only --

03-00:59:06

Coleman: I was the only one.

03-00:59:07

Rubens: How long did that --

03-00:58:09

Coleman: That lasted for about five years, and then I started getting...

[Audio File 4]

04-00:00:00

Rubens: I asked you during this time, as you're moving up those first five years if there were any other blacks --

04-00:00:08

Coleman: Yeah, I was the only one. And then about five years after I'd been in there, which would have put it about '60...

04-00:00:16

Rubens: Four?

04-00:00:17

Coleman: '64, OK. No, before '64. It must have been two years, because one of the things that happened is I got all these -- like I say, the ash and trash jobs for two years, all of the jobs nobody wanted, I got stuck with it, and I discovered that there was a school down the street. There was a Reserve school. But this

Reserve School taught active Army people, National Guards, everybody. Basic Officer Course, Advanced Officer Course, and Command and General Staff Course. Now, that's called CG&S -- Command and General Staff Course. If you're an officer, and you want to get promoted past Captain, you had to go to Command and General Staff School. The selection process was so tough that if you didn't get it, then you would have to take it by correspondence. They started a school system for the Reserves that taught the same thing, were trained -- they would go back there and be trained -- and they would start teaching that here.

04-00:01:25

Rubens: "Go back there" means...

04-00:01:26

Coleman: Going back to Leavenworth -- Fort Leavenworth, and graduate. And the school in Leavenworth, if you went regular, was one year. If you went by the Reserve program, it was a four-year course, because it was in modules, and because you're only going a couple times a week, you see. Well, I was unhappy being the ash and trash guy in the 352nd until I got to be the commander -- but I was at the bottom of the pile, so I said, "You know, let me run to the school." And I went to the school, and I walked in there, and the school commander says, "Am I glad to see you."

04-00:02:04

Rubens: Who was he?

04-00:02:06

Coleman: Well, his name was John Fowler, who was the Commandant. I got that job eventually, 40 years later. He said, "Am I glad to see you." He said, "We have to keep so many students and a faculty to keep the job, and to keep being paid, and to keep our status." And he says, "You have just made my day, because I see you're in the medical thing. I will put you in this medical section, which will fill out the class, because I needed one more body, and in two days, I've got to send my report in." So, he said, "Get in the class." So I got in the class, and the instructor was -- the Colonel who taught was a guy named Hayward, who was a psychiatrist up at Yountville -- the Veterans Home in Yountville. Have you heard of that? It's up in Napa. He said, "All the people in here are usually from Yountville." And I figured, "Well, that's an interesting thing."

04-00:03:09

Rubens: Had you gone to visit there?

04-00:03:10

Coleman: Well, I'd gone to visit there because my father was a chaplain at Yountville. (laughter) So I told him that. He said, "Oh, man. Are we glad to see you." So I started taking these classes.

04-00:03:23

Rubens: So is that in addition to the night that you --

04-00:03:25  
Coleman:

The night -- exactly.

04-00:03:27  
Rubens:

So now you're going two nights a week.

04-00:03:28  
Coleman:

So, I'm going two nights -- yeah, two nights a week. And this was every day of the week, now. It's moved up. And I figured, "Oh, I enjoyed this." And as a result of this, after I got tired of the hospital -- well, I'm getting ahead of myself. The 352 General hospital went to summer camp, and four guys stole ID cards, and they had a big investigation, the hospital commander came to me and said, "I understand you're in school, and you've got these -- because I signed off on the paperwork, you're the only guy I've got in this thing who's going to school. I'm going to make you the investigating officer." So I got stuck with the job of being the investigating officer. In other words, I was the inspector general for the hospital unit, and I enjoyed that job. As a result of that, I got exposed to more things, and I started moving up through the system. I got promoted to Captain, and to Major, and I was the detachment commander, but I had an extra job. Then I started bringing in other people. Then it turns out --

04-00:04:39  
Rubens:

Where were you bringing people from?

04-00:04:41  
Coleman:

Well, during that time, I would go train at different places in the United States as a medical person, teaching what I had been taught. And I would meet people who would move out to California, and say, "I'm looking for a home." "Oh, you're looking for a home? What's your skill? Oh, OK. I've got a job for you. Come on down here." And they would come down to the 352nd, and I'd say -- "Here, I've got a new supply officer, I've got a new transportation officer, I've got this guy, I've got that guy, I've got a nuclear expert who --" At that time, we just got into atomic weapons in the military, so I had a guy from Livermore Lab show up. He was one of the students who took this course I was going through, and he was at Sandia Base, in Livermore. I said, "Well, you're looking for a home? Well, come on. Call me when you get in." And I got him a job. So I started moving through the system. So the climate began to change.

04-00:05:53  
Rubens:

How? Explain what you mean.

04-00:05:54  
Coleman:

It turned out that -- well, back up. The military was basically run by the south, 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 through this time was run by senior officers who were 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. I had learned that from Cal, 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." And then it dawned on me, "Well, I'll start getting more active duty time by just going on active duty for six months, or a year, or whatever." And I played that for three years. So when I retired, I didn't get a check for 30 years' continuous service, I got a check for 15 years of continuous service.

04-00:07:18

Rubens:

Now, how could you do that with...

04-00:07:20

Coleman:

The county let me do it, because one, at that point, I had gotten enough credibility on institutions and jails that, hey, I was valuable to them. Also, when I got into industrial hygiene issues, I was valuable to them. And the reason I started getting into institution, when I was up at Fort Lewis, one of the things I had to do was go to the penitentiary up -- the state thing -- it's not Terminal Island, it's -- there's a federal jail up there, and I walked in there, and lo and behold, one of the big inmates -- the notorious inmate was a guy named Dave Beck who was in charge of the Teamsters Union. And he looked at me and said, "You're kind of wet behind the ears." I said, "Yeah, but I'm outside, and you're inside." And he says, "Hmm, smart, too. You've got a mouth." And I said, "Well, hey, I'm young, stupid, don't know any better." They started me doing jail inspections in the military. That was part of my thing when I was at Fort Lewis in Kings County, and the guy said, "Hey, we like what you're doing." So I then got hooked up with the Canadian government, and we were working with the Mounties, trying to apprehend --

04-00:08:40

Rubens:

You're telling me a story --

04-00:08:42

Coleman:

I know. That's a piece that just popped up.

04-00:08:49

Rubens:

OK. So you're saying the county lets you do it, because you had the skills --

04-00:08:50

Coleman:

The county did, because I had all these skills, and the sheriff said, "Hey, this guy knows it. Let him go to these classes, and let him go and learn all this stuff." But, see, in the county is Tommy Houchins, who ends up becoming the sheriff. But I knew him when he was down at the level like I was, and we kind of moved along together. And he had the People's Park, and all this other sort of stuff. And the other one is, the one, Charlie Plumber, was a Lieutenant in

the Berkeley Police Department when they had the People's Park, and that's when I met him --

04-00:09:23

Rubens: During People's Park?

04-00:09:24

Coleman: During the People's Park.

04-00:09:26

Rubens: [Sort of famous?]?

04-00:09:27

Coleman: Yeah. Oh, yeah. So this all sort of tied together.

04-00:09:30

Rubens: Did you (inaudible) again?

04-00:09:31

Coleman: Nope. I saw him that one day, and wrote a report, and did all this stuff, and then he disappeared.

04-00:09:37

Rubens: OK. So, what you're trying to say was very good, I think, very helpful for us all was the shift in the culture of the military.

04-00:09:48

Coleman: The shift in the culture of the military.

04-00:09:49

Rubens: That they're not so much southern --

04-00:09:53

Coleman: It's now opening up to other people, other groups. More blacks are coming in, because they need -- hey, they need bodies. They need cannon fodder. Lower level. Now, most of these folks are way down at the bottom. 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.

04-00:10:17

Rubens: When does this happen, that you become a --

04-00:10:19

Coleman: '79.

04-00:10:28

Rubens: OK. So, here's what I'd like to do with you. Roughly -- we can check it -- in '79, you become a Colonel --

04-00:10:34

Coleman: I've got the actual date in my case.

04-00:10:35  
Rubens: You're saying there were only 30 --

04-00:10:36  
Coleman: There were 30 black colonels.

04-00:10:38  
Rubens: In both braches?

04-00:10:39  
Coleman: Hey, Army, Navy, Air Force, the whole nine yards. That was it.

04-00:10:43  
Rubens: That were Colonels.

04-00:10:43  
Coleman: There were four Colonels. That's O6. The next step is a Brigadier General.

04-00:10:50  
Rubens: So what I want to take you up to, just in terms of your work at the base --

04-00:10:56  
Coleman: OK, so I'm at the base, now --

04-00:10:58  
Rubens: I want to ask you if you -- is this part of your social life, too?

04-00:11:01  
Coleman: Yeah, it was. It's part of my social life that all of the people I met, I'm still friends with.

04-00:11:10  
Rubens: You recruited people...

04-00:11:12  
Coleman: I recruited people. But we're all at the management level, if you will. In fact, the dentist that came, he was a friend. Well, he was referred by an Army dentist that I know, and I'm 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, because we're all from Cal. Now, the people at the 352<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital, a lot of them were from Cal, because they were local folks. They were the doctors and the nurses, and they graduated, and some of the Lieutenants, and the pharmacists. We all came from the same group. So we became a social group, and the culture was changing. 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 war came through, and the military officers were now beginning to show up -- the blacks would show up, the Majors, and the Lieutenant Colonels, and the Colonels.

04-00:12:40  
Rubens: When is this showing up?

04-00:12:41  
Coleman: This is...

04-00:12:42  
Rubens: Right during the Vietnam era?

04-00:12:43  
Coleman: Yeah, before Vietnam, a few popped up, but then Vietnam, it changed overnight.

04-00:12:49  
Rubens: '67, '68.

04-00:12:50  
Coleman: Yeah. Now, during that time, I'm still -- I left the 352nd Hospital, and moved over to the school, which I ended up becoming the Commandant, the 6227th USAR school. I came in running the NCO Academy. That was the job I was hired to do.

04-00:13:12  
Rubens: And you're hired, roughly, when to do that?

04-00:13:14  
Coleman: I've got a date -- I'll bring all that next time. But I was a Major. I got promoted to be Major, and I started doing that.

04-00:13:23  
Rubens: Who hired you?

04-00:13:25  
Coleman: This guy Fowler, who said, "I'm glad to see you when you walk in." Now, this is four or five years after I walked in the door, and we'd become --

04-00:13:33  
Rubens: An NCO Academy means what?

04-00:13:35  
Coleman: NCO, Non Commission Officer. It teaches all of the Sergeants and the Corporals how to do their job. We educate them on what they're supposed to do, what they're supposed to know, and how to train people. Again, it's training people.

04-00:13:47  
Rubens: So, are those Corporals and Sergeants on active duty?

04-00:13:50  
Coleman: Yeah.

04-00:13:51

Rubens: OK. And they're living where?

04-00:13:52

Coleman: Yeah, active -- well, Oakland Army Base.

04-00:13:54

Rubens: They're living at the Oakland --

04-00:13:55

Coleman: The Oakland Army Base, or the Presidio. See, now, at that point, Six Army Presidio was the headquarters for all the western states. It was called Six Army, and their headquarters was over at the Presidio. What happened was -- I got digressed. They had five guys went in and stole some ID cards, and the commander told me to take care of it as the IG, so what I did was run over to Six Army to the Inspector General, walk in, and introduce myself, and said, "I'm Major Coleman. This is a problem I've got, and this is the unit I am with, and I would like some guidance." And he looked at me, and he says, "I'll be damned." He said, "You are the first guy who's ever walked in here and asked for help in the Reserve program." He said, "So you must want to learn something." And I told him, "Well, I ROTC, and blah, blah," and what I'd done, and he looked at me, and he says, "Well, young man, I'm going to teach you."

04-00:14:57

Rubens: What was his name?

04-00:14:57

Coleman: And he says, "I'm from the south," and I figure, "Oh, my God." (laughter) I've forgotten the guy's name, because he left, and he got promoted. The guy became a general officer.

04-00:15:09

Rubens: And did he teach you stuff?

04-00:15:10

Coleman: Yeah, he taught me the regulations, how to read them, how to interpret them, and what to do, and what not to do.

04-00:15:15

Rubens: How did you meet with him?

04-00:15:17

Coleman: I just walked in. Oh, literally?

04-00:15:20

Rubens: No, would you then meet once a week, or --

04-00:15:22

Coleman: Oh, no. I came in and said, "This is my problem." He says, "OK, how much time you got?" I said, "Well, I'm at your disposal." He said, "Well, I'm going

to be busy such and such." So we'd lay it on the counter for two weeks. I would leave my office in the county, and go over, and spend two hours with this guy, and he would go through the regulation and teach me all this stuff.

04-00:15:43

Rubens: Wow. Now, what are you starting to see? Is there a point when you can see the expansion going on, and the result of the war in Vietnam?

04-00:15:54

Coleman: Yeah. I saw it, and I got involved in some of it, because at this point, the war started going nasty, and the kids --

04-00:16:00

Rubens: What year are we talking about? '67 are the marches into Oakland --

04-00:16:07

Coleman: OK, '67, but back up.

04-00:16:09

Rubens: -- and then '68 and '69 are the --

04-00:16:11

Coleman: I can't tell you the dates. I can tell you who was running Vietnam. General Westmoreland came in, and one of the guys who was a friend of mine in the school who went over there who was black had a big press conference, and accused the people in the structure of being very prejudiced and discriminatory. And that's when the blacks started shooting and fragging the officers. They were marijuana. And I've got dates, but it's not in my head. I just know the timeframe. That's when it really began to change.

04-00:16:46

Rubens: What changed where?

04-00:16:48

Coleman: The culture of the military, because the marching got bad, but it turns out the atrocities that were happening -- this was before My Lai, and all that, and all of the body counts just went crazy. And I happened to run across -- in reading the stuff -- my friend William deCamp (laughter) was on the staff of Westmoreland, and that's where he write his -- to get his star, because he was a good writer. And he wrote reports and stuff like that. You get a good guy who can write and create stuff, you start watching this person, and you start pushing him along.

04-00:17:32

Rubens: I want to know how you as a military instructor begin to learn through the military that it's getting dicey over there, that we're now going to -- Johnson comes in '63 --

04-00:17:51  
Coleman:

OK. I left to go to dental school in Washington, D.C. in September 1968. I get back there, and I walk into -- I'll have to drag that out and show you. I go to a hospital unit to get in, and a guy says, "We don't have any room. We're full." I said, "I beg your pardon, sir?" He's a General officer. He says, "We don't have any room." OK. So, I left. I go down to the Pentagon, walked into the office of the Chief of the Army Reserve, to see the chief. The chief remembered me from Six Army Headquarters; he says, "Oh, hi, Captain, how are you?" "How are you?" I said, "Well, I'm going to school here, and I want to get into a unit, and I went out to Rockville, MD and the General says there's no room." He said, "What?" And the only reason I knew the chief was because when he came to Six Army, I was taking this course with the IG who taught me about regulations for two weeks on how to do all this stuff, and he introduced me to him. And he looked at me, "Oh, OK." See, at that time, there were very few black young officers coming through the system, so when I went to the Pentagon I walked in, and met him. Oh, he remembered me. And he says, "This guy told you there's no room?" He said, "Here." He scribbles a note on a piece of paper. He says, "Here. Give it to him and go back out there." So, I got in my car, and drive back out there. And the guy says, "I told you, there's no room." I said, "I just stopped in and saw the Chief of Army Reserve, and he told me to hand you this." He looked it up, and says, "Oh, OK." Picked up the phone, and says, "We've got a new officer here, he's just been assigned." I had opened up the note and read it, and the note said, "Hey, you assign this guy to such and such position." Well, he was the boss of this General. In fact, he ran all of the Army Reserve -- Two Star General -- he ran all of the Army Reserve people in the United States.

04-00:20:03  
Rubens:

Do you remember his name?

04-00:20:05  
Coleman:

Yeah. I'm blocking -- not Ward... I forgot it.

04-00:20:11  
Rubens:

Well, here. Why don't we talk about this. So, why don't we now really think about -- and just schedule a day right now, doing the war in Vietnam. It's really important. What did you think about it, what was going on in response?

04-00:20:21  
Coleman:

Yeah, let me go -- because I've got all these notes in the books, and then my kids have borrowed some of the stuff.

04-00:20:28  
Rubens:

OK, well, just make your memory go over it.

04-00:20:31  
Coleman:

Yeah, it'll come back to them.

04-00:20:32  
Rubens:

Let's set a time for --

04-00:20:33  
Coleman:

Oh, next week?

04-00:20:35  
Rubens:

Next week, so that we get it --

04-00:20:40  
Coleman:

Yeah, we get all that stuff. Yeah. The Chief of the Army Reserve was Major General Henry Mohr.

04-00:20:41  
Rubens:

And then I think we've got to really move it ahead.

04-00:20:43  
Coleman:

Yeah, OK. (laughter)

[End of Interview 2]



Interview 3: July 19, 2007

Begin Audio File 5 coleman\_gordon5\_07-19-07

05-00:00:03

Coleman: Is this photography 101?

05-00:00:08

Rubens: This is Gordon Coleman on the 19 of July. It's our third interview, and we still have many things to talk about, but I'm just doing a little background information. There's an Army historian, Roger Caswell, and he said if you really wanted to reduce everything of what the importance of the Port of Oakland was, it really was about marine coordination, about getting ships from here to there, and I said, "Well, we've only focused on the school, right now." So I wanted you just to be thinking if you knew anybody in that field, and you're handing me --

05-00:00:49

Coleman: A letter from Roger Caswell. [laughter] I work with this guy.

05-00:00:55

Rubens: This is in '06.

05-00:00:56

Coleman: Well, they're disbanding it. And I call Roger, and say --

05-00:01:01

Rubens: They're disbanding?

05-00:01:02

Coleman: Well, read the thing. I'm on the RAB now. The base closure is going down. It's all wrapped up. But now I'm working as a consultant -- a community consultant -- on the hazardous materials at the base. And that's when I met Roger, three or four years ago.

05-00:01:21

Rubens: So you first get the letter in October of '06. Did you know him before that?

05-00:01:25

Coleman: No, no. Oh, yeah, well, we served on the board together.

05-00:01:27

Rubens: Okay.

05-00:01:27

Coleman: See, I got involved in the base closure in '97, and once I got in there, Roger was one of the people I met. We kind of sat together.

05-00:01:39

Rubens: All right. So we've got to work ourselves up --

05-00:01:41

Coleman: Up to that point, yeah. Today. Yeah. Okay. Yeah.

05-00:01:45

Rubens:

We may skip some details, but we'll come back and fill it in. So let's get back to -- and that's what I was going to ask you, about the main functions of the base at the time. They've changed quite a bit over your time, but we are now at '68 and '69. The war in Vietnam is picking up. You've been to Washington. You're seeing --

05-00:02:05

Coleman:

Yeah, I'm coming back, and I'm seeing the change that's happening. Here's what happened. We were in warehouses, and I can give you the dates and the locations, but they moved us from the warehouse. Now, they're building a big center, a Reserve center, a training center for troops there, and we're shifting. In the meantime, they're ramping up all the troops going to 'Nam, and the Oakland Army Base was a sub-base of the port of embarkation at Fort Mason in San Francisco, but they were housing all the people at Oakland Army Base, putting them on buses to go to Travis, or putting them on the boats to ship overseas. So --

05-00:02:54

Rubens:

Even though it was called a sub-base, it was increasingly become the primary --

05-00:02:58

Coleman:

Yeah, primary stuff. Because two things: one, they're right next to the Navy Base -- the Naval Center. All the supplies were going out from the Navy and the Army right there, and they just started adding bodies, because they had no place for the people in the Presidio for new troops coming in, because 6th Army, at that point, was the headquarters. It wasn't a training ground for people. It was a headquarters, and you didn't have room for transient people. All the places were filled up with senior officers, and staff people, and all that sort of stuff.

05-00:03:34

Rubens:

Who had been, basically, there since --

05-00:03:35

Coleman:

They had been there. Yeah.

05-00:03:36

Rubens:

Hold on one second. I didn't do one of the major things one always does.

05-00:03:41

Coleman:

You didn't start it?

05-00:03:42

Rubens:

I started it, but I didn't --

05-00:03:43

Coleman:

We can stop and go back. [laughter]

05-00:03:45  
Rubens: No, we're not going back. I just didn't double check that we're hearing this, and probably we're hearing this perfectly, but still.

05-00:03:51  
Coleman: Yeah, but that thing from Roger Carswell -- so, I met Roger Carswell...

05-00:03:58  
Rubens: Okay, so let me just hear you talk.

05-00:04:02  
Coleman: Oh, I said I met Roger Carswell in about, oh, '80 -- no, excuse me. 1997. I got involved in the BRAC thing in '97 from the county, and they wanted me to go to a conference, and I went to a conference in Denver, and that's when they said, "Hey, we need some input." And the county said, "Well, oh go do this, and go do that." So I got involved.

05-00:04:27  
Rubens: But thirty years -- I interrupted you, and I shouldn't have --

05-00:04:29  
Coleman: That's all right.

05-00:04:30  
Rubens: -- but I needed to double check. So 30 years before, things are changing. What's literally happening to the school?

05-00:04:37  
Coleman: Well, what's happening to the school is the school's growing, because now we're beginning to start to teach people, and what I came in -- I came into the school as the NCO Academy Director. I then got promoted into the MOS Department, which is jobs. The MOS, that's Military Occupational Specialist. That's like a typist -- a clerk typist. What we ended up doing -- and this is interesting -- I went to Laney College, and talked to Wise Allen, who was my neighbor. [laughter] He lives down the street from me. He went to Cal here, too. He's a Cal grad. He was a Chancellor. And signed a contract with him, and we taught clerk typists, electricians, carpenters, wheel mechanics, cooks, and some medics, and we would send them to Laney College, and they would get the basic -- the theory stuff -- and then we would bring them back to the Army base, and they would actually practice on the equipment that we had, right there. So we expanded.

05-00:05:41  
Rubens: Let me review this. How did you get moved from that position from --

05-00:05:46  
Coleman: Well, I got promoted. [laughter]

05-00:05:47  
Rubens: Okay. Okay.

05-00:05:49  
Coleman:

Well, I got promoted. Col. Fowler, who is a Cal grad, got me into the school, because I was in the hospital. I was a unit commander there, and I used to go down there 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, and see as high as you can go. My goal always was to be an officer. My dad was a Colonel -- excuse me. A Corporal. I figured, "I want to succeed Daddy." So, anybody can do that. Because, remember, my father was in the segregated Army. But I wanted to be an officer, because my mother was very proud, and so I was proud to be an officer. So I figured, "Well, if I get to be a Major, that's my goal." But then Col. Fowler says, "Hey, you can do better than that."

05-00:06:57  
Rubens:

So Fowler moves you from the hospital --

05-00:07:00  
Coleman:

No. Well, okay. The guy in the hospital is a doctor from Cal. Okay? Hudson. And he says, "I can get you a slot and get you promoted." In the hospital, there's slots, and once you fill the slot, you either get promoted out of the slot, or you have to drop out. The only slot was major.

05-00:07:20  
Rubens:

Okay.

05-00:07:21  
Coleman:

So, Fowler says, "Come into my organization, 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, or whatever happens, 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. Our organization table will allow us. 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 guys 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."

05-00:08:05  
Rubens:

You're moved to the school by Fowler --

05-00:08:07  
Coleman:

Yeah.

05-00:08:08  
Rubens:

-- your status is --

05-00:08:08  
Coleman: Status -- I come in as an NCO Academy Director. All I taught was NCOs. Then he says, "Hey. You're doing such a good job, I will move you into another higher position to train enlisted personnel, and then when you do that, you can then start training officers, and if you're good enough after that, the pyramids get narrower, and if you're going to be around, you may end up running the school!"

05-00:08:34  
Rubens: So how quickly do you move from NCO to what?

05-00:08:37  
Coleman: Ah, let's see. NCO... Oh, MOS. I was the MOS. That's the Military Occupational Specialist Department.

05-00:08:44  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:08:45  
Coleman: Yeah. That was a department.

05-00:08:47  
Rubens: How long?

05-00:08:47  
Coleman: I think I was an NCO Director for -- just a moment. I had a note here. I got in there in '69. Oh! One year. One year! [laughter]

05-00:09:06  
Rubens: And you become an MOS?

05-00:09:08  
Coleman: MOS, and after I'm an MOS Director for a year, I got promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.

05-00:09:16  
Rubens: And what are you doing as a Lieutenant Colonel?

05-00:09:17  
Coleman: Now, as a Lieutenant Colonel, I'm overseeing the MOS and NCO departments, and the next thing I know, I end up being the adjutant or the secretary for the Commandant.

05-00:09:26  
Rubens: Who was the Commandant?

05-00:09:27  
Coleman: At that time, it was a guy named Dick Duea, who was a Stanford man. [laughter]

05-00:09:32  
Rubens: Now, let me ask you a question. And when was that? Do you have the year when that?

05-00:09:35  
Coleman: Oh, when I became a secretary for Dick Duea? Yeah, '73.

05-00:09:37  
Rubens: Yeah. Okay. So, we're talking four years, here, and things are moving quickly. The war's moving quickly. When you talked about making that contract with -  
-

05-00:09:48  
Coleman: With Laney College.

05-00:09:48  
Rubens: Yeah. What was your capacity?

05-00:09:50  
Coleman: Oh, then I was the MOS Director.

05-00:09:54  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:09:54  
Coleman: And this was in '70.

05-00:09:56  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:09:56  
Coleman: 1970.

05-00:09:57  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:09:58  
Coleman: And I knew Wise Allen, but I made a contact, called him, and some of the guys who were actually teaching at the college, I had known in the military in just friendship. In fact, one of the guys that went to school here was teaching microbiology. He was teaching lab technicians in how to do that, and he says, "Oh, hey. We're trying to teach kids the basics." And I said, "Fine. I'll pay you." We paid a contract. We got a contract with them. What was said was they signed, and the kids -- we paid their tuition, because the college is looking for tuition -- we paid tuition for the kids, they went on Saturday and Sunday. Not the regular week. It was a Saturday and Sunday --

05-00:10:46  
Rubens: To Laney they went, Saturday?

05-00:10:46  
Coleman: They went to Laney College, yeah. It was long drawn out. But they went there long enough, because they got the very basics. It's like you're learning the ABC's, and then after a while --

05-00:10:54  
Rubens: And when would they come to you?

05-00:10:56  
Coleman: Oh. Then they would come to me every week. They would go to Laney College Saturday and Sunday half day, then they'd come back to me the other half-day. Or if Laney College was shut down, then we would skip a week, and then stay with me, but then it worked that way, and in a year's time, they became minimally qualified to do the job.

05-00:11:21  
Rubens: And the jobs were --

05-00:11:22  
Coleman: And the job was, like I said, there was a clerk typist, who learned how to type papers; electrician, who learned the basic about electricity; they had a school for carpenters, journeymen carpenters; mechanics for automobiles, and it's wheeled vehicles, we called them in the military; and then there's cooking school, a class of cooking there; and the basic meds, which was like laboratory technicians, nursing --

05-00:11:47  
Rubens: What did you call that? Basic --

05-00:11:48  
Coleman: Meds.

05-00:11:49  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:11:49  
Coleman: Medical. There's a {inaudible} in the Army --

05-00:11:52  
Rubens: Now are these guys that are being trained, are they military people?

05-00:11:56  
Coleman: No. They're Reservists --

05-00:11:57  
Rubens: Civilians, or --

05-00:11:58  
Coleman: They're civilians, and some new recruits and National Guard troops.

05-00:12:01  
Rubens: Reservists.

05-00:12:01  
Coleman: Reservists. Yeah. Oh! They're all Reservists. Back up.

05-00:12:04  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:12:05  
Coleman: These people are all Reservists and National Guard.

05-00:12:06  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:12:07  
Coleman: And they're in all the various units in the Bay Area, because we've got hospitals, we've got engineers, we've got infantry, we've got all kinds. But all of these units require a clerk, a cook, driver, and all this sort of stuff. And since they couldn't go to the regular Army base to train, because they're Reservists, they came to us, and it would take a longer process, but we would move the people through the system. Now, once the kid got his basic training, he could request to go in the military if he wanted to! Now, a lot of these kids were junior college and college students or people who didn't want to go to 'Nam. They didn't want to go into the draft, so they got into the Reserve program, and if they stayed in the Reserve program long enough, that would count for their time, as opposed to going to 'Nam.

05-00:12:56  
Rubens: Were any of these people coming from Cal?

05-00:12:59  
Coleman: Oh, God, yeah. [laughter]

05-00:13:00  
Rubens: Where did you see the majority come, or could you say?

05-00:13:03  
Coleman: Most of the kids I saw from Cal were not from the Bay Area. They were from Southern California. Yeah.

05-00:13:13  
Rubens: Were you seeing kids from Laney, and...

05-00:13:14  
Coleman: Oh, yeah. Kids from Laney and {inaudible}, but most of -- now, a lot of the kids were local. In fact, I got approached by a number of prominent people in Oakland -- in Berkeley -- who didn't want their kids to go in the military, so they got in the Reserve program, so they'd ask me could I help them. Well, okay. So I would enlist their kids in the Reserve Program, and give them skills. In fact, one kid ended up being the major x-ray technician for Kaiser Hospital, and the other one was for another hospital. We taught them the basic medical skills, and then they went on duty to Letterman -- not Letterman Army Hospital. In Denver. It's Fitzsimons Army Hospital.



05-00:14:16  
Rubens: Why not Letterman? Just because it was a bigger hospital?

05-00:14:19  
Coleman: Well, Letterman was so busy --

05-00:14:21  
Rubens: All right. It was staffed already.

05-00:14:23  
Coleman: It was staffing. The one in Denver, Fitzsimons.

05-00:14:26  
Rubens: Well, we'll come back to it.

05-00:14:28  
Coleman: But it was a major training hospital. See, Letterman's not a training hospital. Letterman wasn't training. Letterman was treatment-oriented.

05-00:14:36  
Rubens: Got it. Now, let me back up for a little bit. You're keeping your job with the county.

05-00:14:42  
Coleman: I'm keeping my job with the county, and I'm going there. I was stationed there, and that's all I did was run the schools and -- well, I went from the NCO to MOS to the secretary, and eventually ended up being a Commandant, of not that school, but of a comparable school.

05-00:15:00  
Rubens: Well, let's get you just to the end of Oakland.

05-00:15:04  
Coleman: Okay.

05-00:15:05  
Rubens: Firstly, you said the place's building. Is the school literally moving? I have the map here. Was the school --

05-00:15:10  
Coleman: The school wasn't literally moving, but -- yeah, it was. When I was in the hospital unit, I was in Building 590, which is the big warehouse. As you go down 7th Street, and as soon as you came up off the 7th Street -- that underpass? -- the building to the right, there was a big, long warehouse, and that's where the hospital unit was located. And we had one end of it. We had little {inaudible} offices. I mean, these were old warehouses, and this was in the sixties. And then we moved to the new facility in '69 -- '67 -- at Building 1086. Brand new Reserve building, okay?

05-00:15:52  
Rubens: Now, this was still medical?

05-00:15:53  
Coleman: No, no!

05-00:15:54  
Rubens: Oh, now the school?

05-00:15:55  
Coleman: Now the school!

05-00:15:56  
Rubens: New facility, brand new, 1086.

05-00:15:58  
Coleman: The school. And then they said okay. Then they moved in the hospital, too, but it came a little later. So the warehouse, Building 590, is now empty. They convert the warehouse to sleeping quarters for all the troops coming through, because the surge is going.

05-00:16:15  
Rubens: Now, do you remain in 1086 basically until the --

05-00:16:18  
Coleman: Yeah. 1086 until I left and went to San -- well, until we moved out to Camp Parks, which was later on.

05-00:16:24  
Rubens: What date was that, though?

05-00:16:26  
Coleman: The Camp Parks move? It was in '77. January, '77. [laughter]

05-00:16:32  
Rubens: So you have been telling you had been on the east coast, you were thinking about moving up and coming back, and you were beginning to see a real change in the complexion of the personnel, and of the Army.

05-00:16:44  
Coleman: Army. That's right.

05-00:16:45  
Rubens: And you had been one of the only African Americans in leadership?

05-00:16:48  
Coleman: Yeah, in a leadership role. And while I was there in the medics, in Building 1086, there was a Major Merritt -- a black Major -- who came in, and he had been to 'Nam, and this is going to go ahead to go back to second time. In fact, all of the active duty people who were helping us train -- now, we're a hospital and we're a school. The active Army sends you advisors, two or three advisors per unit, and they make sure we're doing what the book says, and the latest doctrine, and they're giving us their practical experience. Now, the guy who did was a Colonel -- a black Colonel -- and he died. I forgot his name, but I

remember Major Merritt, who was his assistant. And he was telling me about the war, and how it was that they were beginning to have a surge, they were getting more and more blacks coming in, but the blacks were at the lower end of the totem poll. They were all the enlisted people, very few officers. He says, "I like the way you're doing stuff." And he says, "Stay in it." He encouraged me more -- and I'm a young pending Major. I was a Captain when I met him, but I was a Major and got promoted. 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, and all the -- as we call it, the ash and trash stuff." So, he --

05-00:18:50

Rubens: Where had this guy come from? I know he'd been in Vietnam?

05-00:18:52

Coleman: Oh, he had been in Vietnam, but he came from back east, and I've forgotten.

05-00:18:56

Rubens: Okay. Was he about your age, or a little older?

05-00:18:58

Coleman: Oh, he was a little older. Yeah.

05-00:18:59

Rubens: Did you admire him?

05-00:19:00

Coleman: He was close to my age. He went over to Vietnam, and that's when they had the fragging and all of this stuff, and this guy made the newspaper, because he complained about General Westmoreland, about his policies, and then he tells me, when we were communicating off and on, he says, "You will not find a black staff officer on Westmoreland's staff in 'Nam, in MACV." He said, "They'll have people there, but there will never be a regular staff officer there." And he says, "I run across some of your classmates from Cal and all that sort of stuff." And he said, "You know, the thing you need to do, Gordon, is learn how to write, get an education, and learn a social skill, because that is a key to success for a black officer to get through the system. You have the social graces -- "

05-00:19:51

Rubens: What happened to him?

05-00:19:52

Coleman: I think the guy got killed or died. I lost track of him. I don't know whatever happened.

05-00:19:56  
Rubens: He was --

05-00:19:57  
Coleman: He was a Major, and he went over to 'Nam, he made such a big stink, he hit the newspapers, and there was a big thing --

05-00:20:04  
Rubens: That happened *after* you had met him?

05-00:20:05  
Coleman: Oh, after I met him. Yeah. He left us and went over there.

05-00:20:08  
Rubens: He was with you for a short while...

05-00:20:09  
Coleman: Oh, he was there for about a year or two years. Their tour was usually about two years, and then --

05-00:20:13  
Rubens: Training, and --

05-00:20:14  
Coleman: Yeah. And then they rotate these guys through.

05-00:20:16  
Rubens: He was a career --

05-00:20:17  
Coleman: Yeah, he was a career officer. Yeah.

05-00:20:19  
Rubens: At the same time, are you noticing discussions on the base about the war in Vietnam, and the reason I'm --

05-00:20:26  
Coleman: Oh, yeah. I am, because at that point, some of the units I knew, there was some dissention among the officer corps that they weren't happy with how the war was being conducted, so there was beginning to be a little groundswell among not my peers, the group above me, about the course of the war, and they weren't too happy about it.

05-00:20:50  
Rubens: How would you be party to that, would you --

05-00:20:52  
Coleman: Well, the bottom line in the military is you never criticize your superior office. But when you get to know these people and you work with them, eventually certain things will begin to come out. "Well, what do you think about such-and-such?" "Well, you know."

05-00:21:06  
Rubens: But, I mean, is this at staff meetings, or when you're having lunch, or --

05-00:21:09  
Coleman: It's after having lunch. It's kind of informal stuff. At a staff meeting, you never criticize this stuff, unless it's a closed circuit thing. But it's a kind of an informal thing that you get to talking about, because one of the things, you never criticize your boss, you never criticize -- remember, they can court martial you if you criticize the president. You don't do that. The military is not to be political, but it's become political.

05-00:21:36  
Rubens: You learned that in Washington --

05-00:21:37  
Coleman: I learned that. But it's now very political.

05-00:21:39  
Rubens: Now, I want to ask you something else. Your grandfather, of course, had been an extremely political person in --

05-00:21:47  
Coleman: That's right.

05-00:21:47  
Rubens: -- Oakland.

05-00:21:47  
Coleman: In Oakland.

05-00:21:48  
Rubens: And the whole nature of politics in Oakland changed. I can't remember the year when Wilson became mayor, but it was around --

05-00:21:56  
Coleman: Lionel Wilson.

05-00:21:57  
Rubens: Lionel Wilson. Around '65, 7. He was mayor when King was killed, wasn't he? I'm sure he was.

05-00:22:06  
Coleman: Yeah, he was. But Lionel Wilson had been a judge, because I used to play tennis with Lionel Wilson.

05-00:22:09  
Rubens: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I know that.

05-00:22:12  
Coleman: Yeah. I was surprised he went into politics.

05-00:22:14  
Rubens: So were you aware of what's transforming in Oakland, or was that really just sort of outside your purview?

05-00:22:21  
Coleman: In a sense, it was, because Lionel Wilson -- well, first of all, there was Josh Rose, who ran the YMCA, and his son, and I. Well, we were in Cal. In fact, I've got to show you a picture. We were in the glee club at Cal. He was the first black elected official, and then Lionel Wilson followed him.

05-00:22:42  
Rubens: He was a City Councilman?

05-00:22:44  
Coleman: Yeah. Josh Rose. Yeah. He was the first black --

05-00:22:46  
Rubens: City Councilman.

05-00:22:26  
Coleman: -- City Councilman in the city of Oakland. Well, my mother worked on his committee when he ran the NAACP, and all that sort of stuff.

05-00:22:58  
Rubens: So were you particularly active in his --

05-00:23:00  
Coleman: No. I heard discussions. Those days I --

05-00:23:03  
Rubens: You lived in Berkeley, so you weren't voting.

05-00:23:05  
Coleman: No, I was in Oakland. I was in Oakland.

05-00:23:06  
Rubens: Oh, you did live in Oakland? You must have voted for him, unless he wasn't the district.

05-00:23:09  
Coleman: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, yeah. For the mayor? Oakland? Yeah. See, I really wasn't active politically. I would listen on the fringe area, because I remember the people kept saying, "If you're going to stay in the military," and at this point, my mother was very proud of me, and I was kind of proud, because, "Hey, I'm moving up through the system, and now I'm getting to be a field grade officer," which was very -- in black society, up until the end of World War I, the highest you could go was Captain, unless you were a chaplain. Different. [laughter] The only officer who really got there was Charles Young, the black West Pointer who was stationed over at the Presidio, and my father had seen him in the military, and I -- as a kid -- used to go to the American Legion things, and they talked about him. In fact, I belonged to the Charles Young

Post 269 of American Legion here, and it was down at Clawson School on Peralta. About -- oh, what is it? 32nd?

05-00:24:17

Rubens: Was he a local boy, Charles Young?

05-00:24:19

Coleman: No, no, no no. He was back east.

05-00:24:20

Rubens: But he had been stationed out here?

05-00:24:22

Coleman: Well, in fact his group, the 10th Calvary, they made the trails for Sequoia National Park and the national park down in King's Canyon, and if you go down and look at them, you'll find that these guys did all this stuff. Piece of history that's not very well known. So my thing was I was kind of on the fringe area. I didn't get actively involved in that stuff, because I listened to the older people. Until you get established, you don't start pushing all this stuff. You don't become --

05-00:24:51

Rubens: But you remember --

05-00:24:51

Coleman: I remember.

05-00:24:51

Rubens: -- when Rose gets elected?

05-00:24:53

Coleman: Oh, yeah. I do remember --

05-00:24:54

Rubens: Do you remember the --

05-00:24:55

Coleman: When Rose got elected, and I remember when Lionel Wilson became a judge. In fact, Lionel Wilson -- well, we played tennis, and then there was another guy named Al Broussard, who was a Supreme Court justice in California. Well, we all were in school together up here at Berkeley. But we weren't very active at that point.

05-00:25:15

Rubens: Okay, you're separate. You're in separate worlds.

05-00:25:16

Coleman: I'm separate. Yeah. See, now, Al Broussard went in the military, and when he came back, and I went to Korea, he said, "Hey, Gordon, I want you to go buy me some stuff." So I bought him something and sent it back here to him. But I never got really active involved, because part of the problem is in order to be

successful actively, you have to have a pretty good economic base. You've got to be very comfortable, and in those days, you could only live in certain areas of the cities, and we were living on the fringe area, being raised next to Macarthur Boulevard, which was North Oakland. Remember, most of the Oakland population is down in West Oakland, the black population, or out to East Oakland. So we were living in a mixed neighborhood.

05-00:26:02

Rubens: Your wife, and you, and your --

05-00:26:04

Coleman: No, I'm not married. I'm not married. I didn't get married until I was in school in DC. My wife and I got married in Berkeley. But in this active time when the war is really beginning to move, the boundaries weren't broken, so it's very -- you got to be careful --

05-00:26:23

Rubens: Wilson had moved up, though, hadn't he? He had move to around --

05-00:26:26

Coleman: Well, yeah. Wilson had, because --

05-00:26:28

Rubens: He was a judge.

05-00:26:29

Coleman: He was a judge. And he was an attorney. And he had a mixed marriage, too.

05-00:26:35

Rubens: Oh, I didn't know that.

05-00:26:35

Coleman: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. Lionel Wilson had a mixed marriage, too. And his wife was a lawyer. And then Broussard. All these guys were in this group. So you had to get a pretty good -- what is it? I say economic base -- you had to have a reasonable job that you could afford to do some stuff. You couldn't have to work from hand to mouth, paycheck to paycheck.

05-00:27:00

Rubens: You were a civil servant, and you...

05-00:27:02

Coleman: Civil servant. So I was pretty stable, so I figured, okay. And the war's going on. Now, the FBI and CIA are starting to say, "Hey, we don't like all this ruckus on campus. We don't like what's going on." So then they started sending people from the military to infiltrate all this. I'm very much aware of that --

05-00:27:27

Rubens: How?



05-00:27:27

Coleman:

-- because I'm down there -- well, the unit next door is a military intelligence unit. [laughter] And I'm talking to these guys, and they're saying, "Oh, we're doing this, and we're doing that." And then later on, the Panthers came along, so they tried to infiltrate all that, because the FBI was very worried, and they said, "Hey, this is Communist-inspired, and blah, blah, blah, and this is against our war effort." So, you know.

05-00:27:51

Rubens:

How big was that military intelligence unit? About?

05-00:27:56

Coleman:

They had two, and if I'm not mistaken, they were six to ten people. Very small. Very, very small.

05-00:28:06

Rubens:

When you said they had two, they went from two?

05-00:28:09

Coleman:

No, they had two units.

05-00:28:09

Rubens:

Two units. Okay.

05-00:28:10

Coleman:

Yeah, they were two units down there.

05-00:28:11

Rubens:

Why two?

05-00:28:12

Coleman:

I haven't the faintest idea.

05-00:28:14

Rubens:

One is military intelligence?

05-00:28:14

Coleman:

Well, no. Two military intelligence units. Two separate units at the Army base down there, and each unit had about six to ten people. Very small, very hush-hush.

05-00:28:27

Rubens:

But they're military people?

05-00:28:28

Coleman:

No. They're Reserve people, and they're active duty people, too. You hear? Now, remember: a Reserve unit always has active duty people, but the bulk of the people are the Reservists, because the military is training us to use this, because one of the things that happens is when they need -- they can always call us up and say, "Hey, we're going to activate you guys." Okay.

05-00:28:52  
Rubens: How do you know they're FBI and CIA?

05-00:28:54  
Coleman: Through talking to them! And again, this is at lunch! [laughter]

05-00:29:00  
Rubens: So is this an overlap? That's what I'm not quite getting. They are people who have been in the Reserve, who then the CIA or --

05-00:29:08  
Coleman: Oh, no, no, no. They're people in the Reserve, and they're --

05-00:29:10  
Rubens: Who are recruited?

05-00:29:11  
Coleman: -- they're recruited, or they're actually working with them.

05-00:29:14  
Rubens: Okay. Okay.

05-00:29:15  
Coleman: But they're still a Reserve person, but they're being influenced by what the rest of the organization is saying.

05-00:29:21  
Rubens: And are they concerned about what's going at Berkeley?

05-00:29:23  
Coleman: Oh, God, yeah! They're concerned about what's going on at Berkeley, and around the Bay Area, and they even had coffee houses down by the Army base, and they would say, "Hey, you guys, don't join the Army. Go to Canada." I mean, they were trying to find --

05-00:29:40  
Rubens: The anti-war people?

05-00:29:42  
Coleman: Anti-war. Well, yeah. But, see, that's why they had these guys from the units who would come in and say, "Well, hey, we got this place down here. Can you go down there and spend some time?" Well, you know, you could or you couldn't, depending upon how -- not patriotic. Depending on how motivated you are for what you believe in.

05-00:30:00  
Rubens: Do you feel like talking about it? Did you go down and --

05-00:30:02  
Coleman: Oh, no. They never -- no. Hey, I'm teaching. They never approached me, because, see, I found that later on, once I got to talking with these guys, and when we moved up. Once I got in a field grade position, and I started asking

questions, then it turned out, "Well, you know, we really can't talk about this." But, yeah: "Your suspicions are right, Gordon. Let it go at that."

05-00:30:24

Rubens: So then good. Let's just finish a little on that, and we'll come back to you. The troop train demonstrations --

05-00:30:30

Coleman: The troop train demonstration.

05-00:30:32

Rubens: Did that impact you at all? That was during the day. You mostly taught at night --

05-00:30:36

Coleman: Yeah, but we taught at night and also on weekends. Remember, Saturday and Sundays? So that's the daytime. The troop train demonstrations -- we never got involved with the troop trains coming into the based at Port Chicago and that. No, we never got involved in that. But the tenor and the feeling of what went on happened, so when we would get ready to go to training or summer camp for two weeks, we caught all kinds of stuff, because now everybody's together, and you come to find out the guys you've been teaching, they begin to express some of their views, and they are not happy with the war, they don't like it, but as I'm saying, "Guys, you raised your right hand, you said such-and-such, I expect the minimum out of you."

05-00:31:28

Rubens: Well, did it affect how you would literally {bivwac?} up to where the --

05-00:31:31

Coleman: No, the bivwac wouldn't be, because we would always go on an Army post, so we were divorced from the civilians. But the kids would then leave and go into town! The only place where we would go would be Fort Ord and Fort Lewis, or sometimes out at Camp Parks, but it was Fort Ord, Fort Lewis, or the Presidio, but the Presidio couldn't accommodate so many people, because they were busy with everything else. So what they would do is put us to place like Fort Baker, or Fort Scott, or Cronkite over in Marin County, and it's -- hey, you're out in the boonies. There's nobody around. But you get to talking to the troops and the kids, and I'm saying, "You know, what's going on?" We have so much turmoil going on, and we're losing a good bit of our population, of what's going on and how they react, and they would leave here after their enlistments, and go back out into the community, and either support you or not support you. And you could see the effects of this, because they wanted to get into the Reserve to escape going to 'Nam, particularly.

05-00:32:50

Rubens: So would that make you adjust how you were teaching?

05-00:32:53  
Coleman: No. My job was to give them the basic stuff. My job was to teach them the ABC's. Now, once you got back past D, then that's --

05-00:33:05  
Rubens: That was somebody else's job?

05-00:33:06  
Coleman: That's somebody else's, you see?

05-00:33:08  
Rubens: Then let me ask you specifically, also, then if you ever had any encounter with the Panthers, or you certainly read about or observed --

05-00:33:14  
Coleman: Oh, yes, I did. [laughter]

05-00:33:17  
Rubens: You may have told me about that.

05-00:33:18  
Coleman: [laughter] Yeah. I had an encounter with Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and another guy, I've forgotten.

05-00:33:29  
Rubens: Yeah. Can't say his name either.

05-00:33:32  
Coleman: But about this time, I started going to Command and General Staff School. That was a requirement to move up the ladder to become a full Colonel. And I discovered in my unit, in the hospital, particularly, and in the school -- in the school, they expected you to get an education. In the hospital unit, they didn't. But I found out in the hospital unit, I was the only black there -- the only black officer except for a nurse. That they didn't care about if you go to school or not, but it was kind of a restricted, closed society and group.

05-00:34:13  
Rubens: On base?

05-00:34:14  
Coleman: On base. Yeah. On base. By the time I came back -- I got married, and it was a closed group, and they were kind of upset that I married my wife, two of the officers were. We went to a party, and they asked her, "Well, why did you marry him?" Hello! And my question -- "Well, whoa! Back off!" My wife mentioned it to me, and I went to the guy, and said, "Hey, what the hell is going on with you?" This kind of attitude was kind of pervasive in the hospital, but when I got into the schools, it was different. So I started going to get an education, and when in the process, I went there with another friend of mine -- a black guy who I met in one of my classes when I went to camp -- he decided, "Let's go talk to the Black Panthers." We went to St. Augustine Church, which is down on Grove and 27th, and down in the basement -- in the

basement of the church, and I forgot -- there was Father Baskerville, and there was another priest. I forgot the gentleman's name right now. It's escaping.

05-00:35:31

Rubens: You'll fill it in.

05-00:35:33

Coleman: We had a meeting, talking about what they wanted to do, and how to organize. We said, "Hey, well, we've gone through training of how to deal with these kinds of stuff. We'll help you." It was, "No, we don't want you. We don't trust you."

05-00:35:52

Rubens: Because you're in the military?

05-00:35:53

Coleman: "Because you guys are in the military!"

05-00:35:55

Rubens: Were you wearing your uniform?

05-00:35:56

Coleman: No! We just walked in like we were. We weren't in a uniform. And the guy said, "We don't trust you." Okay. So we left. And then I went back, and was talking to the guys in the MI unit, and said, "Hey, are you guys doing -- ? What's going -- ?" It was called {ConIntel?}. That was the coined name. It was a counter intelligence, into -- well, remember when they had the thing at Kent State, and all that sort of stuff? The riots were going on? The Reserves that I knew of -- not sure that all of them did it, but some of them were saying, "Yeah, we're curious about what's going on. What do you know?" So I made an extrapolation, saying, "Well, if they are concerned about the Panthers," and I talked to these guys in the units, and they said, "Well, yeah. We can't talk about it, but your suspicions are pretty good. They're reasonable." I figured, "Well, okay. So maybe there is something that's going on with this stuff."

05-00:37:02

Rubens: So then you understood why --

05-00:37:03

Coleman: I understood why what's going --

05-00:37:05

Rubens: No, why Huey and all would be wanting the distance from you?

05-00:37:08

Coleman: Oh, yeah. Oh, I understand why they rejected us. Hey, I have no problem with that. The thing that really got me, though, is I guess naïveté, and my feeling was, "Hey, I've always taught that right and wrong, and you get a shot, but being married, and now looking at how things are not always the way you are, I can see where people can get disenchanted and get angry," and then I read in

the paper -- well, when they had the free speech here, Bettina Aptheker. I figured, "Oh, Aptheker -- hey, her father's Herbert." And people will go one way or the other. I think, part of this university has kind of slipped in education that they don't teach both sides of the coin. They push more one or the other. You get some disenchantment, and the kids --

05-00:38:01

Rubens: Well, let's go back to the Panthers. Did you think they had any *raison d'être*? I mean, they certainly did help --

05-00:38:08

Coleman: I don't think so.

05-00:38:09

Rubens: They helped Wilson get elected. I mean, he would not have been elected without --

05-00:38:14

Coleman: Oh, yeah. He supported these guys. Now --

05-00:38:18

Rubens: Well, they supported him.

05-00:38:19

Coleman: They supported him. But --

05-00:38:20

Rubens: And the other thing that they were doing was really showing that the police had been very discriminatory to the black community.

05-00:38:26

Coleman: Oh, yeah. But the other thing is one of the things that happened when I was in the hospital unit, one of my Sergeants was a guy named George Hart. George Hart ended up being the Chief of Police for the city of Oakland when Huey Newton and these guys got in a shoot out deal. {laughter} So I'm seeing both sides of this stuff, and I'm trying to say, "Hey, I was raised by my grandfather -- take care of the family. And then, after that, then deal with the rest of the society."

05-00:39:02

Rubens: {overlapping dialogue; inaudible} community. Your grandfather was taking care of the community.

05-00:39:04

Coleman: Yeah, I know, but hey --

05-00:39:06

Rubens: But peacefully.

05-00:39:07  
Coleman:

His family -- but see, now, I've got a mixed family. So I'm going to be *very* careful about how I move and do some pushing and shoving. But it was fascinating that I saw what Huey was trying to do, and from my education in Command and General Staff of what's going on, and the dissatisfaction of how society was acting, and I don't know who's at fault to blame -- the cause and effect was there.

05-00:39:38  
Rubens:

But it didn't particularly influence --

05-00:39:40  
Coleman:

It didn't affect me. It didn't affect me, because --

05-00:39:42  
Rubens:

Or the base.

05-00:39:42  
Coleman:

Or the base, no.

05-00:39:43  
Rubens:

Other than those demonstrations.

05-00:39:45  
Coleman:

Other than that. But the thing is I think the base had a positive sense, in that the Reserve people who came in saw one side, and then could go back out into the community, and either accept it or reject it. And in most cases, they accepted it, because one, if you didn't and your draft number came up, good-bye! You're over in 'Nam.

05-00:40:04  
Rubens:

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

05-00:40:08  
Coleman:

Yeah. Yeah. Okay, now, they were beginning to work there, and they were getting the jobs as the warehousemen, the leadermen, and all these supervisory things.

05-00:40:17  
Rubens:

As the place expands?

05-00:40:18  
Coleman:

As the place expands. So one, in the African community, they were looking for jobs and employment, because they wanted to get a secure financial base. So that's their impetus. So they would go along with this. And of course, in that time, in the military, if you got in and you were successful, you could move up the ladder and get better jobs, and pay, and all that sort of stuff. 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. And a lot of people left and went to Canada. So the Reserve program was a safe haven for people who were smart enough to figure out, "Well, this is the best thing for what I want to do. I may not agree with this, or I will do my subversive stuff, whatever it is, or I will agitate, but I'm not going to be very visible behind all this stuff."

05-00:41:18

Rubens:

And so are the classes expanding? Are they getting larger and larger?

05-00:41:21

Coleman:

Yeah. The classes are expanding, and then every year, we would recycle. We would have the same class over again.

05-00:41:26

Rubens:

Oh, yeah.

05-00:41:28

Coleman:

Yeah. But then as the war got worse and worse, then the classes started -- the {pip?} says, "Hey, I don't want to go there." So the Reserve school, the classes I had, as the war went further and further, special skills like medics? Yeah. But the common stuff, nobody wanted to bother and get involved in that. By that time, I moved into as the adjutant or the secretary for command of the school, so this was later on --

05-00:41:56

Rubens:

Yeah, okay, so let's move to that. So this is by '70--

05-00:42:01

Coleman:

'70--

05-00:42:02

Rubens:

--3, I think you said?

05-00:42:03

Coleman:

Yeah, '73. In '73. Now, at that point --

05-00:42:06

Rubens:

The classes are shrinking some?

05-00:42:08

Coleman:

Yeah. The classes are shrinking in size, and there's a new department coming up. But the one thing that was really beginning to bloom was the officer classes. Now, these were the guys who were going to end up running the management of the war, if you will. Not the guys who are doing the actual work, the clerks and the enlisted people. The officer classes were expanding, because now we're picking up active duty people who have to get their ticket punched to promote to go to C&GS, and we were now teaching that. And that's where Conway Peterson came in, because he was one of the instructors when I was an adjutant. I think George Gaebler had left by that time. Both of those guys taught officer courses, and you had to go through the basic courses,



the advanced courses in Command and General Staff to be promoted. To be a Colonel, you had to get Command and General Staff.

05-00:43:10

Rubens: So you could take those classes on that --

05-00:43:11

Coleman: At the base. Right there in Building 1086.

05-00:43:12

Rubens: Yeah. Got it. So you took those classes?

05-00:43:15

Coleman: Yeah.

05-00:43:16

Rubens: Then you ended up --

05-00:43:16

Coleman: 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.

05-00:43:44

Rubens: So you're now the assistant to the --

05-00:43:46

Coleman: I'm assistant to the Commandant. Now, there's an Assistant Commandant, but I was the chief of staff, if you will. I handled all the paper work of the place.

05-00:43:56

Rubens: Okay. I was going to ask, what did you do?

05-00:43:58

Coleman: I handled all the paperwork. Now, I was in a very powerful position, because any officer who got in trouble, the only guy who got them out of trouble was me.

05-00:44:10

Rubens: I think you did tell that story, about two people -- there two times when you had to help somebody?

05-00:44:15

Coleman: Well, no. These are enlisted guys in a hospital.

05-00:44:17

Rubens: Oh, that was later. Okay.

05-00:44:18  
Coleman: Yeah. Yeah. The guys stole ID cards.

05-00:44:20  
Rubens: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

05-00:44:21  
Coleman: No. But in this case, the officers, if they didn't attend class, or if they failed the grades, and you could get a second shot, but you had to have somebody do the paperwork for you. Well, if I'm the keeper of the paper, guess what? I can always slow down your application, or can put it away, or if you came and convinced me, because the commander and the deputy commander would say, "Gordon, what do you think?" They would look at the academic scores, and they'd say, "What do you think of this guy?" And they'd talk to the instructor. But I'm the guy who was doing all the paperwork. In fact, one of the officers - - Gen. Dan Helix - I helped his career. [laughter] He was a mayor of Concord.

05-00:45:12  
Rubens: Became the mayor of Con--

05-00:45:14  
Coleman: Oh, no. He was the mayor of Concord, but one of the things that happened was he didn't -- well, my friend Eddie Meese. Edwin Meese?

05-00:45:28  
Rubens: Yeah.

05-00:45:28  
Coleman: Okay. From Oakland High? Okay. I knew Edwin Meese, because I went to Tech. He was the counselor for the president -- well, Reagan. And he didn't complete his class, his C&GS class. So you could get a waiver, and guess who wrote the waiver, and tell the boss all this sort of stuff? So there was Eddie Meese, and then there was Dan Helix. I wrote the stuff together, and my Commandant signed the paperwork, and said, "Fine, Gordon. Here, take care of this." And I'd say, "Sir, this is the situation, and this is what I recommend." "Do it."

05-00:46:07  
Rubens: What did you expect to get out of it?

05-00:46:09  
Coleman: Nothing!

05-00:46:10  
Rubens: You just thought --

05-00:46:11  
Coleman: Hey, it's a friend of mine!

05-00:46:13  
Rubens: Okay. Okay.

05-00:46:14  
Coleman: Now, these guys treated me reasonably well. I have no problem with these guys. You know?

05-00:46:20  
Rubens: This is Ed Meese in '73, it's got to be about?

05-00:46:26  
Coleman: Yeah... Yeah.

05-00:46:27  
Rubens: So he's still with --

05-00:46:27  
Coleman: Yeah. And he never did finish Command and General Staff, he got promoted by the president. And the people said, "He can't do it!" And I said, "Don't tell me what he can't do, as the Commander in Chief can do anything he wants!" In fact, I've got some orders saying, "By order of the President," as opposed to the Chief of Staff. No. "By order of the President, you're doing such and such, Gordon." Thank you.

05-00:46:53  
Rubens: Were there any black men in that?

05-00:46:56  
Coleman: [laughter]

05-00:46:56  
Rubens: No, no.

05-00:47:00  
Coleman: Oh, I had people behind me I was trying to train --

05-00:47:02  
Rubens: I understand. I understand.

05-00:47:04  
Coleman: -- bring up. But no, I was it. Like I say, at that time period, there were roughly thirty black flag officers in the military, and I was the youngest one.

05-00:47:15  
Rubens: I remember. Yeah. That's a good story of Ed Meese, though. Did you ever see Ed Meese again?

05-00:47:19  
Coleman: Oh, I saw him when I was at the War College. [laughter] And I saw him when I tried to get promoted.

05-00:47:24  
Rubens: Wasn't that before the War College?

05-00:47:26  
Coleman:

No!

05-00:47:26  
Rubens:

No, okay.

05-00:47:27  
Coleman:

When I worked the thing, that was before the War College, but then I saw him at the War College, and we got to talking, and I said, "I need a favor, Ed." And I did the same thing that he -- "I need a favor." And the guy said, "I can't help you." I said, "*Guys*. You know, you're really making me -- hey. My sense of fairness is not being fulfilled, but I guess that's life." He said, "Well, I can't, because I'm being investigated, and I can't stand the heat." Because he was now the Attorney General. And I said, "Well, I need a letter from you to the boss, to get me one of these slots."

And then when I went to Helix, he said, "Gordon, you caught me a day late, and a dollar short." He said, "I've already sent my recommendation forward."

05-00:48:17  
Rubens:

For somebody else?

05-00:48:17  
Coleman:

Yeah, somebody else. And I was like, okay. But that's how things work.

05-00:48:23  
Rubens:

So let me get this straight. I'm checking my time here, because I don't want to miss this at all. We're doing fine. You're now --

05-00:48:31  
Coleman:

I'm a Lieutenant Colonel, and --

05-00:48:36  
Rubens:

This is before you go to the War College?

05-00:48:37  
Coleman:

Yeah. Before I go to the War College. Oh, I hadn't got promoted to full Colonel.

05-00:48:40  
Rubens:

Okay. All right. Let's move you up there.

05-00:48:42  
Coleman:

Okay. So what happened is -- well, part of this, at that time, that's when I back to Aberdeen Proving Ground, in the seventies -- the late / mid seventies -- and got involved writing reports on -- I refused to write reports on Agent Orange, and what was this Hooker Chemical thing? Up in upstate -- it was Love Canal. They wanted us to write reports on the Love Canal.

05-00:49:20  
Rubens:

Who?

05-00:49:22  
Coleman: Okay. I get promoted from Lieutenant Colonel to full Colonel.

05-00:49:28  
Rubens: {OUK?}

05-00:49:29  
Coleman: There's no job for me at this point in time. Okay? So what I --

05-00:49:33  
Rubens: We're talking '74?

05-00:49:35  
Coleman: I'm talking '7-- no, '79.

05-00:49:38  
Rubens: '79. Okay. You're a full Colonel?

05-00:49:40  
Coleman: I'm a full Colonel now. It's '79. Okay? So I started going back -- I'm still in the county working, okay?

05-00:49:47  
Rubens: Yeah, of course.

05-00:49:48  
Coleman: And I start going back to Aberdeen Proving Ground, which was the environmental hygiene agency for the Army.

05-00:49:55  
Rubens: I see. Where's Aberdeen, Texas?

05-00:49:58  
Coleman: No, no! Maryland. Aberdeen, MD.

05-00:50:00  
Rubens: Oh, Maryland?

05-00:50:00  
Coleman: Baltimore! So I'm going across country --

05-00:50:05  
Rubens: Is this also because it's related to the field you're doing in --

05-00:50:08  
Coleman: That's exactly what I was doing in the county. Yeah. Industrial hygiene. So I go back there, and started working with the Surgeon's Office, the Surgeon General's Office. That's my assignment, as a scientist, if you will, doing stuff for lead, lead poisoning in the rifle ranges. I did an analysis of the nerve gases, and they were thinking about using a lot of different kinds of things. Also -- well, chemical warfare. I was doing some chemical warfare stuff. They weren't sure what to do.

05-00:50:48

Rubens: Now, is the county giving you time off for this?

05-00:50:49

Coleman: Oh, yeah. They're happy, because while I'm there, the guy says, "Well, hey, we've got another problem, Gordon. Well, what about the noise, or what about this and this? Could you?" So I'd pick up the -- you know. Okay.

05-00:51:02

Rubens: So you have two months off? Six months off?

05-00:51:03

Coleman: A month. A month a year. And I had a month a year for straight stuff, and then I would request additional time, and sometimes they'd give it to me, and sometimes they wouldn't, but most of the time they were very, very favorably impressed by what I was doing.

So while I'm back there, I come back, and the guy said, "There's an opening as a Commandant in the school in San Francisco." Col. Peterson? Yeah, I think Col. Peterson nominated me, and -- well, my name came up in the system, and I'd worked for him, and Col. Owens. I'd worked for Col. Owens, too, so I had a good recommendation in the system. I had done everything right, got all the classes and things done, and the next thing I knew, I get a call from up in Fort Lewis. The guy said, "I want to offer you the Commandant of the school in San Francisco." You know, take it! I'm fine. I was happy as a {inaudible}.

05-00:52:11

Rubens: Why is someone from Fort Lewis...?

05-00:52:12

Coleman: Well, the way the system was run, all the schools in California were run out of up north at Fort Lawton, which is a sub-post of Fort Lewis. But the people who had the money [laughter] were San Francisco. [laughter] The Presidio!

05-00:52:33

Rubens: So this is now 19...

05-00:52:34

Coleman: '79. And the guy who I met a long time ago when I was a young Major, who is now a general officer, he was in the S3 shop, they said -- I guess I had met enough of the staff, the civilian staff who stayed there all the time. The military staff was always rotating through, so their tour of duty was maybe just about two years, maybe three at the most. But his civilian counterpart, the guy who helped move the paper was always there. I got to know all of these people, and when the time came, well, they're remember the name, and say, "Oh, yeah, I remember this guy." And they would pull the records, because the files were always kept over there. There were carbon copies --

05-00:53:24

Rubens: "There," meaning San Francisco?

05-00:53:25  
Coleman: Yeah. Yeah. We had our own files, but they always had copies. It's called a 201 file, the personnel file there. Okay? So when the job came open, and since I'm close to headquarters, the guy says, "Hey. There's a school in San Francisco, and you live over here? You want the job?" So I took the job.

05-00:53:46  
Rubens: The job is literally called?

05-00:53:48  
Coleman: Oh. Commandant of the USAR School.

05-00:53:51  
Rubens: US?

05-00:53:52  
Coleman: Okay. Reserve. It's the 62 27th. 62 27th USAR School, and it was down by -- I don't know if you've been over to the Presidio. Do you know where Crissy Field is?

05-00:54:04  
Rubens: Yeah. Yeah.

05-00:54:05  
Coleman: It's right at the base of Crissy Field. The building is no longer there. It's close to the Coast Guard station there.

05-00:54:11  
Rubens: What's the difference between that school and the Oakland Army Base?

05-00:54:13  
Coleman: Identical schools.

05-00:54:14  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:54:16  
Coleman: Same.

05-00:54:16  
Rubens: How many people there, compared to --

05-00:54:18  
Coleman: Same. Yeah. Same amount of things. In fact, at one time, I could have told you. There were -- in our 6th Army area, there must have been -- oh, I've forgotten. There must have been twenty schools. Identical schools, did the same thing. Now, they may not have taught the same -- they taught the same officer course, but as far as the MOS, it depends upon what military units were there. But they all taught clerk typing. See, basic. And wheel mechanics. They always taught that. So the schools were identical things, just geographically located different --

05-00:54:53  
Rubens: Well, how long were you over there?

05-00:54:54  
Coleman: I was there for two years, and then I went to the War College. [laughter] No! I went to War College in '82, so that was from '79... At Presidio, I was there for a year and a half.

05-00:55:10  
Rubens: Did you have any relationship to the base in Oakland at all?

05-00:55:13  
Coleman: No. At that point, I'm out of it. My relationship was at the Presidio, and what I did there --

05-00:55:22  
Rubens: You ran the school.

05-00:55:23  
Coleman: Yeah, I ran the school, but I had enough friends in the things where we'd go back and forth and talk to each other. But I had nothing to do with the Oakland Army Base after '79. I had nothing to do with the actual base, except the closure issue.

05-00:55:37  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:55:39  
Coleman: As a civilian. Not a military guy.

05-00:55:39  
Rubens: All right. All right. By the way, '79, when you get that job, it's four years of the winding down of the war in Vietnam.

05-00:55:50  
Coleman: That's right. Four years. Well, no, the war ended in '75, didn't it?

05-00:55:53  
Rubens: Yeah.

05-00:55:53  
Coleman: '75. Yeah. It's winding down.

05-00:55:55  
Rubens: So, that's four years of --

05-00:55:56  
Coleman: Four years. Yeah.

05-00:55:58  
Rubens: You know, that allegedly it's over, and --



05-00:56:00  
Coleman: Yeah. It's over. They're going back to what they were before, which was a transportation port.

05-00:56:06  
Rubens: Okay.

05-00:56:06  
Coleman: And all of the old buildings are still there, but they're now empty, or they're using them for storage, or something else.

05-00:56:12  
Rubens: And I want to ask you a question specifically about that, as the transportation port. Because that was the word that Caswell used. He said that --

05-00:56:17  
Coleman: Yes. It is. It was a transportation point.

05-00:56:19  
Rubens: Well, is there anyone that you know -- is there anything to say specifically about the relationship between Oakland and San Francisco as who had more authority for the transportation itself?

05-00:56:31  
Coleman: No.

05-00:56:31  
Rubens: I mean, what kind of people -- were they civilian or military people who really scheduled the --

05-00:56:37  
Coleman: They were military people, because, see the port of embarkation was in San Francisco at Fort Mason, okay? The guy who ran the Army base was a one star General. The guy over in San Francisco, I think, was a one star, or two. I've forgotten. See, that was a transportation issue.

05-00:56:56  
Rubens: Okay. We can find out. Yeah.

05-00:56:58  
Coleman: But the guy at the Army base was a one star General, because they did all the shipping of materials. Fort Mason didn't ship any materials.

05-00:57:06  
Rubens: Got it. I got it.

05-00:57:07  
Coleman: See, Fort Mason is just a -- it's like a paper post.

05-00:57:10  
Rubens: Got it. I got it.

05-00:57:12  
Coleman: Because everything shut down, remember? Well, Fort Mason, they used to ship boats out there, but they stopped doing that.

05-00:57:22  
Rubens: All right, let's stop for one second.

05-00:57:23  
Coleman: Okay.

05-00:57:24  
Rubens: This is really key for me to understand this, and this is fascinating.

[Audio File 6]

06-00:00:01  
Rubens: You were explaining to me just when we broke -- this is tape two of interview three -- I was trying to get you to explain to me the difference between both San Francisco and --

06-00:00:12  
Coleman: And the Oakland Army Base.

06-00:00:13  
Rubens: And Oakland Army Base, and also that by '79, the war in Vietnam's over, and so --

06-00:00:18  
Coleman: Yeah. It's winding down.

06-00:00:21  
Rubens: -- things are really different. So let's --

06-00:00:24  
Coleman: Well, I'll reiterate. What I was saying was the port of embarkation at San Francisco in Fort Mason is kind of a paper place, but the actual movement of all the materials -- I say ash and trash, but really, they're moving butter, beans, people, and everything else -- is done in Oakland, because that's where they've got all the docks, and the supplies coming in from the Navy, which is right down the road. So it turned out --

06-00:00:51  
Rubens: How much -- yeah, go on.

06-00:00:53  
Coleman: What happens is Oakland Army Base is interfacing with the public more, because we're hiring more people, civilian wise. Fort Mason, there's not that many people working.

- 06-00:01:04  
Rubens: So let me stay with this for a minute. How much interaction did you have with the Navy? You would probably have little, because you were at the college.
- 06-00:01:12  
Coleman: Yeah. I had very little. I was with the school. I had very little with the Navy, but once I got involved -- and this is interesting -- I said earlier on I stopped school to work when my mother got sick, early on. And I worked at the Navy base right down the road. So I worked there, handling manifests and taking documents from the Navy base, to Point Molate, San Francisco, San Bruno, all over to the ships, and learned that they were shipping stuff from Oakland to all of the Pacific. In fact, the Oakland Army Base shipped more stuff than anybody else on the West Coast! In fact, they supplied the whole damn war.
- 06-00:01:58  
Rubens: Yeah. I don't think you had said that, but that is wonderful to hear. So when, at its height, let's say from '73, and then the winding down to '79, who would be the kind of person might we find to talk to who would be in {trouble?}? Did I ask you that?
- 06-00:02:16  
Coleman: Yeah, you asked me about that. See, now, the guy who I knew was Gen. Sanford, who was a one star black officer who retired, went up to Seattle, ran a school district, and then died of a heart attack.
- 06-00:02:30  
Rubens: But nice that we get him in the history. Good. He was someone who did that?
- 06-00:02:33  
Coleman: Yeah. He was the guy, yeah. And his headquarters was the one where Roger Caswell and I -- we met, and we did some stuff there, and looked at all -- well, after I got off the -- [coughs] Excuse me.
- 06-00:02:51  
Rubens: Please, yeah, take your time. We'll just cut that out.
- 06-00:02:58  
Coleman: After I left the county, I volunteered, and really got involved with Roger Caswell, and started going through, with Roger, all the buildings I knew had problems, like the grease rack --
- 06-00:03:11  
Rubens: Well, we're going to come back to that. We're going to do a good job on that. So, now I think maybe -- maybe I think now we'll -- while you were on the Oakland Army Base, though you were with the school, you did know this Gen. Stanford?
- 06-00:03:27  
Coleman: Oh, Sanford. Yeah.

06-00:03:29  
Rubens: San-ford. And he's one of the few blacks that you've mentioned.

06-00:03:35  
Coleman: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

06-00:03:38  
Rubens: Okay. And he basically was in charge of the base?

06-00:03:39  
Coleman: Yeah. He ran that. Yeah. Now, there was another General before him. I didn't know him, but I did know Sanford, because I met him.

06-00:03:46  
Rubens: Then they would have a staff under them?

06-00:03:48  
Coleman: Yeah. They would have a staff.

06-00:03:49  
Rubens: Because military people were coordinating all of this?

06-00:03:50  
Coleman: Military people running the whole nine yards.

06-00:03:53  
Rubens: Okay. Could you just sort of briefly summarize, then, what was it like for you that two years -- what'd we say, a year and a half? -- at Fort Mason? Nice position...

06-00:04:05  
Coleman: I didn't actually go to Fort Mason. See, I'm still stationed at the Army base, but I interfaced with the people at Mason, off and on, see? So I was never stationed over at Mason. But we had to relate back and forth with these people what's going on.

06-00:04:20  
Rubens: But I thought you were the Commandant of this --

06-00:04:22  
Coleman: Oh. Oh. Now that's the school.

06-00:04:24  
Rubens: The school, that's what I mean.

06-00:04:24  
Coleman: Oh, I'm sorry.

06-00:04:25  
Rubens: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. '79.

06-00:04:27  
Coleman: Oh, yeah. Now that was an interesting thing, because --

06-00:04:30  
Rubens: Yeah, what was it like? How was it different, let's say?

06-00:04:34  
Coleman: [laughter] Well, it was different, because when I came there, I got closer to the 6th Army staff and all the general officers, and at that point, I had aspirations for becoming a general officer, and I --

06-00:04:47  
Rubens: Were they welcoming to you?

06-00:04:49  
Coleman: The one who was the most welcoming to me was a guy named Gen. Young, who was the chief of staff, a one star, and he told me, "Gordon, you may not make it," he said, "because you've got one thing going against you. You are not a combat arms officer, and the military is run by combat arms, which means you're either infantry, artillery, or -- " Oh, I'm blocking!

06-00:05:21  
Rubens: You'll add it.

06-00:05:22  
Coleman: Armor. Those are the three fighting arms. "If you're not one of those guys, it's going to be hard to get up to the ladder."

06-00:05:30  
Rubens: So he wasn't referring to that you were black?

06-00:05:31  
Coleman: No, nothing. He said, "You've got the wrong thing." He said, "But you've got qualifications that people would just love to have, but you've got the wrong branch." And me and my stubbornness says, "Don't tell me, sir, because I have gotten two friends of mine, one black, who was an MSC -- Medical Service Corps -- officer, and they *both* became general officers, and Major Generals."

06-00:05:55  
Rubens: Who were they?

06-00:05:56  
Coleman: One of them is a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, and the other one -- who was one of my mentors as a medic -- named Gen. Bryant, and the other one is -- ah! Congressional Medal -- Pat Brady. Now, Pat Brady is from the University of -- Oregon State, and Gen. Bryant is from Louisiana, from -- there's a black college down in New Orleans that he went to.

06-00:06:34  
Rubens: You'll get it. I should think of it.

06-00:06:36  
Coleman:

Yeah, those are two officers. And see, I said, "These guys can make it," and furthermore, when I got to the War College, and I heard the chief of staff, General Myers, and all these guys talk about, "Hey, we need people like you!" But then when I applied for all of the slots, and the people at 6th Army, I had a bunch of older officers who said, "We're not going to promote this guy. He's the wrong branch. I don't care how good he is." It's my drinking club against your drinking club against this guy's drinking club. And we are a fraternity. "You're in the wrong fraternity!" Nothing to do with color, just the wrong fraternity.

06-00:07:14  
Rubens:

Okay. So what did you do in San Francisco? What was that {inaudible}?

06-00:07:16  
Coleman:

Oh, so what I did in San Francisco, I then expanded the purview and the influence of my school up and down Northern California, and I got the National Guard and all the other units more involved, and increased my enrollment, and improved the facilities, and went to the General and said, "Hey, I need this. I need that." And nobody had ever bothered to do this stuff before, so I increased it. In fact, I got in some Australian officers, whom I got assigned to us as instructors and as liaisons, so when we went to -- and at this point, I was strictly involved in teaching Command and General Staff -- so when we would have Command and General Staff schools in Reno, which was the summer camp for the two weeks, where we would go there for four weeks, I had more foreign officers, and I was teaching more active Army officers, as opposed to Reserve officers. During my short tenure, I improved and got all these people involved.

06-00:08:28  
Rubens:

Were you raiding Oakland at all?

06-00:08:31  
Coleman:

No, that was not my area of -- well, I wasn't raiding, but I would talk to the people, and say, "Hey, come to my school, as opposed to going to that school, because we can..." [laughter]

06-00:08:39  
Rubens:

Well, that's what I mean.

06-00:08:41  
Coleman:

In a sense. But if they lived there, that's fine! I mean, because they had a choice. They could go where they wanted to go, but most of the people were on that portion, and San Francisco has a more international thing, so I had two Australian officers there. They went to camp with us. They got paid just like everybody else.

06-00:09:04  
Rubens:

So you were really in a position where you were able to build something, whereas you had been part of something --

06-00:09:08  
Coleman: Yeah, part of it. I was able to build, and as a result, when I got selected to go to the War College, Gen. Hall, three stars, sent me a personal letter congratulating me, and he was the 6th Army Commander.

06-00:09:23  
Rubens: So how did the --

06-00:09:25  
Coleman: I've got to find it. I've got to dig it.

06-00:09:27  
Rubens: How does it come about that you got to the War College?

06-00:09:29  
Coleman: Well, I came about to go to War College -- one of my guys in the hospital unit -- my Commander -- his wife's named Priscilla. He was a physician. He was a psychiatrist in the unit at the 352nd General Hospital when I was a Captain and a Major. We started going to classes, and he said, "Gordon..." White fellow. I don't know, for something, we clicked, but he was a psychiatrist, and I said, "I'm in this class." And he says, "Oh! You're going to school?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Fine." So he was a class ahead of me -- yeah, he was a class ahead of me -- and he encouraged me to get the education, more than any other officer before.

06-00:10:28  
Rubens: So we're talking about when?

06-00:10:29  
Coleman: This is before I met Merritt!

06-00:10:31  
Rubens: Okay. This is about when, though? When was this?

06-00:10:33  
Coleman: Oh, God. This was back in --

06-00:10:37  
Rubens: When you were in Oakland?

06-00:10:38  
Coleman: {Christiansen?}. Robert Christiansen. Col. Robert Christiansen, who was a psychiatrist.

06-00:10:44  
Rubens: When you're in Oakland?

06-00:10:44  
Coleman: In Oakland. Yeah. And this is back in -- oh, sixties. Early sixties. Yeah. And he went to the War College, and he said, "It's a lot of work, Gordon, but I think you're the kind of person who would enjoy it," he said, "so, apply, if you

get the chance." Back of my head, forgot about it. I get to be the Commandant  
--

06-00:11:11

Rubens: You build the school.

06-00:11:12

Coleman: And my friend Al Bryant gets to be a general officer, and he says, "Hey, you need to go to the War College, Gordon." I said, "What?" He said, "You need to go to War College. Apply." Oh, okay.

06-00:11:28

Rubens: Where is Bryant at the time?

06-00:11:30

Coleman: No, Bryant's -- he left. He left. See, he was in San Francisco. He was in the Presidio school. He left San Francisco, and he got transferred back. He was a pharmacist out in the VA hospital in San Francisco, he gets transferred back to Washington, DC. And he was a pilot. That was his thing. And said, "Gordon," and he was black. And he says, "Hey, Gordon." He was kind of a mentor in the Reserve for me, because he would say do this, do that, whatever it is.

06-00:12:00

Rubens: He knows you're in San Francisco, he says apply to the War College.

06-00:12:02

Coleman: Yeah. He said, "You need to go to War College." So I had a friend named Julius Debro, who was a black officer. He came behind me, and got promoted. Yeah. I beat him on the promotion list just by a year. He goes back to Maryland to teach. He came to Cal, gets his PhD here from Cal.

06-00:12:32

Rubens: PhD in what?

06-00:12:34

Coleman: Criminology. In fact, I brought his thesis back. [laughter] I went to see Al Bryant, and I saw Julius Debro, Col. Debro. He's back there, and his assignment is in the Pentagon, and he says, "Yeah, I'm going to the War College." I said, "Oh!" I said, "I'd like to go." He said, "Yeah. Gordon, apply for the War College." So I applied for the War College, and lo and behold, I got selected.

06-00:12:59

Rubens: Tell me about the War College. I don't know about it.

06-00:13:01

Coleman: Now, the War College is interesting. There were 140 of us in the class, and we'd come from all of the services in the United States, the military, plus we came from all of the Allied Forces in the countries around the world. One of



my good friends is from Australia, two African guys, one from Sudan and one from Nigeria.

06-00:13:27

Rubens: Do you have to be at a certain level to get in?

06-00:13:28

Coleman: Oh, yeah. You have to be a senior officer. You have to be a Lieutenant Colonel or above.

06-00:13:34

Rubens: And where is it literally located?

06-00:13:35

Coleman: It's in Carlisle, PA.

06-00:13:37

Rubens: Oh, Carlisle! Oh. It's still there?

06-00:13:40

Coleman: It's still there. So I applied --

06-00:13:44

Rubens: 140 a class.

06-00:13:45

Coleman: Yeah, 140 in the class, and they pick three? No, four? Five Reserve officers a year to go, and I was one of the five, and they look at your record. Well, I had -- hey, I was a Commandant of the school, I had gone through, had very successful tours of all of the different things, and --

06-00:14:13

Rubens: Why not?

06-00:14:14

Coleman: -- it's competitive! It's very competitive.

06-00:14:15

Rubens: This is 1982?

06-00:14:17

Coleman: 1981. It was one year. And most people, you could take it by a two-year course by correspondence, and then you go back for two months every year until you finish it, but I said, "Hey, I'll take the long course."

06-00:14:33

Rubens: And of course Alameda let you off?

06-00:14:34

Coleman: "Alameda County, I'm going on active duty. Good bye!" And they're happy.

06-00:14:39  
Rubens: So did you take your family back there?

06-00:14:41  
Coleman: Yeah, I took -- we went back and had a good time.

06-00:14:43  
Rubens: One year?

06-00:14:44  
Coleman: One year.

06-00:14:44  
Rubens: So what's the focus?

06-00:14:47  
Coleman: Now, the focus is how to run a government, how to run a country. The whole purpose is how not to go to war, but they teach you all the management styles of management, they teach you history, they teach you philosophy. When you graduate, you get a master's degree. International relationships. They were pushing then, but they didn't have -- they just got the university and the colleges saying, "No, we don't like this, you have to -- "

06-00:15:24  
Rubens: Who's really running the school? Who pays for the school?

06-00:15:26  
Coleman: The Army. The Department of Defense is running it.

06-00:15:28  
Rubens: Department of Defense.

06-00:15:29  
Coleman: Yeah, Department of Defense. But they have a relationship with Dickinson College, which is close to it. There's a chair -- oh, and the State Department too. Now, there's 140 students. They're from all the senior management positions in the government: CIA, the State Department, the mapping, things like that. Okay? FBI, you name it. Military people, and in the class, I was the fourth ranking officer in the class. [laughter] Yeah.

06-00:16:10  
Rubens: Now, it's 1982, so the second year of Reagan's -- it's a change in the tenor.

06-00:16:16  
Coleman: It's a change, and it's a change, and of course, it's interesting, because of the 140 students, of Americans, there were six blacks in the class.

06-00:16:31  
Rubens: Were there any women?

- 06-00:16:37  
Coleman: One. Yeah, Mary. Yeah, a friend of mine, Mary Willis. She became a general officer, too.
- 06-00:16:45  
Rubens: A couple of women.
- 06-00:16:45  
Coleman: Couple of women, yeah.
- 06-00:16:47  
Rubens: Any other people of different ethnicity?
- 06-00:16:50  
Coleman: Oh, yeah. Now, the international students --
- 06-00:16:53  
Rubens: Well, no, no. I meant of the American, though. Probably, I don't know, was one Hispanic, or...
- 06-00:16:59  
Coleman: No Chinese -- no Asians. In fact, I've got --
- 06-00:17:07  
Rubens: You could show it to me another day.
- 06-00:17:08  
Coleman: Yeah, I'll bring my booklet, and show you the pictures of all the students.
- 06-00:17:12  
Rubens: Yeah, we should have some papers with this.
- 06-00:17:14  
Coleman: Yeah. No, ethnicities -- yeah, one or two --
- 06-00:17:19  
Rubens: Well, here -- I'm kind of wondering if Vietnam was the *bête noir*, then? You know, is this what we're talking about we're not going to do again?
- 06-00:17:29  
Coleman: Yeah, because what you did is the class -- okay. They teach you government. Every major cabinet member comes and talks to you. Okay? And the rule is you're invited to come to this place and speak. You're going to be asked questions by the students. You've got to answer the question, but there's no attribution. You don't tell the source. You tell us what's going on. If you do not want to answer the question, you ain't invited back. Now, every subject matter we have, once a week, every Friday, they give you an assignment for the following week, and you had to write a four-page paper.
- 06-00:18:27  
Rubens: So you had case studies?

06-00:18:29  
Coleman:

Of everything you can think of, from food to race to transportation to insurgency, world population, you name it. You had to write a four-page paper you turned in Monday morning. That afternoon, you got it back, and you said, "Reduce it to two pages." No -- one page. The four pages to one page. You turned in Tuesday, you got it back Tuesday, even before you left, and the assignment is one paragraph. You turned in Wednesday, one paragraph, and then the guy says, "Okay. In class," and they broke every session into fifteen students, and the fifteen students were made of every service, civilian, whatever it is. There were fifteen groups.

06-00:19:24  
Rubens:

There were some civilians?

06-00:19:25  
Coleman:

Oh, yeah. Like I say, CIA, State Department, mapping, whatever it is. The fifteen students then, one guy would be picked up and say, "Okay. I'm the president. Brief me. You've got three minutes!" And they'd punch the clock. So you've got to give this one paragraph brief, and I'm walking down the hall, and you've three minutes to tell me about this whole thing, and if you couldn't cut the mustard, you got critiqued by the class, and guess what? You get laughed at once. You don't get laughed at the second time around. So, you sharpen your mind. And this happened every week that we were there {inaudible}, until we went on break.

06-00:20:08  
Rubens:

Now, I forgot one other thing. So there's the war in Vietnam that's got to be something that's constantly being bounced off, but also, didn't Reagan come in with the hostages that had been taken in Iran. Now, was that something that was being discussed?

06-00:20:25  
Coleman:

We were privy to the whole nine yards.

06-00:20:29  
Rubens:

We were not -- no, Bush is the first Iraq War. So 1980, though is Reagan, and he's --

06-00:20:36  
Coleman:

And he busted the pilots -- not the pilots, the --

06-00:20:41  
Rubens:

Hostages.

06-00:20:42  
Coleman:

Not the hostages, the airline -- the union.

06-00:20:46  
Rubens:

Oh, yeah, well, that.

06-00:20:46  
Coleman:

That was one thing. That's when {inaudible} Meese.

06-00:20:48  
Rubens:

But after a while, when he was taking his oath of office, we saw those hostages being released.

06-00:20:52  
Coleman:

Yeah, we saw -- being released. Yeah, that's right.

06-00:20:54  
Rubens:

I didn't know what war issue might have been discussed.

06-00:20:57  
Coleman:

Well, the war issue we had was we bombed Algeria -- Kadafi.

06-00:21:03  
Rubens:

Kadafi, yeah.

06-00:21:03  
Coleman:

Kadafi, yeah. And we shot those planes down. Now, we had to be classified for top secrets. You couldn't get in the building unless you have a pass. My wife had a pass, but you could only go to certain areas. She'd go to the library and the main place, but that's it. Classroom. Until they cleared the building, and every -- oh. They had briefings. Every morning they would have a different speaker would come in and talk about the subject that you'd talk about. You would then go to lunch, and they would have lunch with these guys, and then they would rotate around. Everybody had a chance to do this. I would go to lunch as often as I could, because I enjoyed talking to these guys and having frank discussions with them.

06-00:21:59  
Rubens:

I mean, was there some concern that by bombing Kadafi, it was going to be holy war in that region?

06-00:22:04  
Coleman:

Well, yes, there was. In fact, we even talked about terrorism. Now, the point was every paper we wrote got looked at by the people in the administration, and that's where they get half of their ideas! So we were really writing basic policy. It was there, because, hey, that was one of the functions we do! Hey, 140 papers on how to deal with cutting down a tree and all the ramifications? And then you had to write a policy paper at the end of the year, and I wrote on our relationship with the Horn of Africa, the country of Zaire. That was my --

06-00:22:47  
Rubens:

So, I would love to hear more about this, and I might come back some time. What was your goal getting out of there? What did you think you wanted to do?

06-00:22:53  
Coleman:

Okay. When I got out of there, I was determined I was going to be a general officer, because I'd talked to enough general officers, and I saw my classmates, and the war started right before -- well, when the war was cranking up for the Gulf War, okay? And I didn't have an assignment. Okay? So I came out and went to the Reserve force at ARPERCEN, the personnel center, and was looking for an assignment, and the next thing I knew, I got a phone call. They wanted me to interview to be the chief of staff for a hospital center over in Hamilton in '82, '83, and I took that job.

06-00:23:45  
Rubens:

That meant leaving Alameda?

06-00:23:46  
Coleman:

No. I'm still working at Alameda, mind you. I'm still a Reserve. So I come out of the War College. I come back, go back to work, and now I'm the chief of staff of a hospital unit.

06-00:23:57  
Rubens:

Oh, oh. Of a hospital unit. Okay.

06-00:23:58  
Coleman:

Of a hospital unit.

06-00:23:59  
Rubens:

Based out of --

06-00:24:00  
Coleman:

Hamilton. Over in Novato. Yeah, Hamilton Air Force Base. And then they wanted me to come back and sit on promotion boards, and involve the policy of the military, because now they're really pushing to integrate more and more people, because I am one of the favored few who went to the War College. And there are not that many of them. And I figure, "Hey, I can be a general officer, because I understand these people now!" And they told me what to do and what not to do, and I've talked to enough --

06-00:24:33  
Rubens:

And you were a general officer?

06-00:24:34  
Coleman:

I never got there.

06-00:24:35  
Rubens:

Okay.

06-00:24:36  
Coleman:

Never got there.

06-00:24:37  
Rubens:

What would it have taken to --

06-00:24:38  
Coleman: Five boards, and I was always number two.

06-00:24:39  
Rubens: Ah. Okay. What do you mean by five boards? You have to go before five boards?

06-00:24:43  
Coleman: You have to go before a promotion board and be screened, and they select.

06-00:24:47  
Rubens: Okay. I see.

06-00:24:51  
Coleman: Now, I don't know about race, but after I'd known the system and I got to talking to some of the people, and they said, "Yeah, Gordon. You were always in the top three. You were always, usually, number two."

06-00:25:03  
Rubens: So your positions were chief of staff of a hospital, did you do something after that?

06-00:25:06  
Coleman: Nope. Oh, yeah. After that -- I was the chief of staff of the hospital, the doctor, who I thought was incompetent, and I went to the Surgeon General of the Army and blew a whistle on him, and you don't do that in the military without bearing the consequences, and the only reason I did that was his chief of staff was a classmate of mine when we were 2nd Lieutenants, and we remembered each other. His name was Cole, my name was Coleman, and the Surgeon General was a three star General, and I complained about how his doctor was treating the troops and what he was doing, and he said, "Well, Gordon, he's probably going to relieve you. This is how the system works." I said, "I don't care. All I want is a reasonable report. I mean, he's not going to sandbag me. If he does, I'm going to make so much of a stink you guys will never hear the end of it." So I got out, and the next thing I knew, I got a call that I ended up being the special assistant to the one star General who ran the personnel system for the Reserve forces.

06-00:26:19  
Rubens: And where were you based?

06-00:26:20  
Coleman: I was at St. Louis. Out of St. Louis, MO.

06-00:26:25  
Rubens: No kidding!

06-00:26:25  
Coleman: That was my assignment. So I would go back there. I'd fly back there.

06-00:26:30

Rubens: How often?

06-00:26:32

Coleman: Oh, two weeks sure, whenever they needed something, they'd pick up the phone. I'd say, "Yeah, okay. I'll be there."

06-00:26:41

Rubens: Special assistant to the man who ran --

06-00:26:43

Coleman: Who ran ARPERCEN -- Armed Forces -- well, Reserve Personnel Center. US Army Reserve Personnel Center is called ARPERCEN, which is now tied into the whole Army. Because in those days, they had two distinct groups and they kept us separate. Now, they're pulling us all together, because they need us.

06-00:27:02

Rubens: Okay. Okay.

06-00:27:05

Coleman: But, see, while I was at the War College, I wrote a bunch of papers -- policy papers -- about what they should change and do, and now, twenty years later, they're just getting around to it, so I feel pretty good about that.

06-00:27:15

Rubens: {I want to?} see these. We've got to see these. So is that where you end up? Is that when you --

06-00:27:19

Coleman: That's the end of my career, my military career, then I retired.

06-00:27:22

Rubens: What made you retire?

06-00:27:25

Coleman: Clock ran out. Oh, they wouldn't promote me, so my clock ran out.

06-00:27:28

Rubens: I see.

06-00:27:29

Coleman: See, I had thirty years of actual service. At the end of thirty years, the only way you can extend is to be a general officer, and I figured, "Hey, there's three slots. There's four slots around here." And I applied for five. I applied for four of them, and one of them, somebody -- my name just showed up -- says, "Hey, you're going to be considered for this job. Would you want it?" "Yeah, I'll take it." It was back in Washington. Okay.

06-00:27:57

Rubens: So do we have this here?



06-00:27:58  
Coleman: No, that's not in there. That's in the future. Well, if you wanted the time, we can keep talking.

06-00:28:04  
Rubens: Well, all right, but at this point --

06-00:28:05  
Coleman: Oh, at this point, no.

06-00:28:06  
Rubens: At this point, you've now ended. Out of St. Louis, you then retired. How long did you do St. Louis?

06-00:28:11  
Coleman: Yeah, I retired. Let's see --

06-00:28:15  
Rubens: Because your retirement is in --

06-00:28:16  
Coleman: When did I leave War College? '82. No. I retired in '86. '86.

06-00:28:22  
Rubens: Okay. So about four -- a little -- three years, because you were off in '86.

06-00:28:24  
Coleman: Yeah, three years. Yeah, yeah, yeah. '86. Yeah.

06-00:28:28  
Rubens: Then, let's say then --

06-00:28:30  
Coleman: Now, but see, when I retired from there, I really got involved with the BRAC.

06-00:28:34  
Rubens: Well, that's just what I want to say.

06-00:28:35  
Coleman: Yeah.

06-00:28:36  
Rubens: So when is that starting, about? Because I got the letter I've got to give back to you.

06-00:28:40  
Coleman: That was in '97.

06-00:28:42  
Rubens: Okay. So you have about ten years where -- this is 2006.

06-00:28:47  
Coleman: Yeah. I just got that.

06-00:28:48  
Rubens: The letter. Oh, okay.

06-00:28:49  
Coleman: From Caswell.

06-00:28:50  
Rubens: But around '90 --

06-00:28:50  
Coleman: But I got involved -- in '97. I had a note here. In August of '97, my boss in the county says, "Hey, they're talking about hazardous materials at the Oakland Army Base. Would you got to a conference for us and see what it's all about?" So I go back there, and lo and behold, "Oh, God, jeez, don't I know you?" [laughter] So I came back and the guy said, "Well, you're going to be our BRAC -- you're going to be the base closing representative for our department." And then I didn't meet Caswell until later on.

06-00:29:34  
Rubens: Yeah. So you're out of the Army. Just in the next nine years or so, do you have reunions? Are there groups that you are seeing?

06-00:29:46  
Coleman: Okay. Out of the nine years after I got out --

06-00:29:48  
Rubens: You're still working for the county, of course.

06-00:29:50  
Coleman: I'm still working for the county, and I started meeting with Conway Peterson, Col. Owens, another guy, Chuck Harrington, who's a graduate from here, John Toman, who's a West Pointer. All of us guys get together once a month and have lunch.

06-00:30:10  
Rubens: You set this up?

06-00:30:11  
Coleman: We set this -- well, I, since I'm the youngest guy of the group, they call me the baby of the group. I mean, hey, come on, guys.

06-00:30:18  
Rubens: But you had been to the War College?

06-00:30:19  
Coleman: Well, John Toman is the only other one that's been. John Toman and I are the only guys in the group who have been to the War College, and of course, he's a West Pointer, so everybody kind of -- he went to high school on the Hudson.

06-00:30:32  
Rubens: But he retired out here?

06-00:30:33  
Coleman: Yeah, he retired. In fact, he was one of the assistants for Teller, Edward Teller.

06-00:30:38  
Rubens: Oh. Wow.

06-00:30:40  
Coleman: Yeah, so, I mean, John and I are pretty close.

06-00:30:42  
Rubens: So really, as soon as you retired, did you start getting those groups together to meet?

06-00:30:46  
Coleman: Before I retired we were kind of -- we kind of all -- well, see,

06-00:30:50  
Rubens: Had seen each other anyway?

06-00:30:51  
Coleman: No, but here's the problem --

06-00:30:52  
Rubens: I'm worried about you sitting too close to, that's why I'm --

06-00:30:54  
Coleman: Oh, oh. I'm sorry. Excuse me.

06-00:30:54  
Rubens: No, only because I'm missing you in the --

06-00:30:56  
Coleman: Oh, oh. I'm sorry. I'm getting excited. [laughter]

06-00:30:59  
Rubens: I know you are!

06-00:31:00  
Coleman: Getting excited! [laughter]

06-00:31:01  
Rubens: I know, but I don't want to miss your face. Okay. Okay.

06-00:31:04  
Coleman: No. See, John Toman, Peterson -- Conway Peterson -- Mark Owens, and a guy named Kenny Cusick, we were all together as a group. We met together. Even while -- well, Mark Owens, Peterson, and myself all worked for the same guy. We worked for Mark Owens, then I worked for Conway Peterson, so we trained through. When I was a Major, Conway Peterson was my supervisor.

06-00:31:37  
Rubens: Got it. Got it.

06-00:31:38  
Coleman: And Conway Peterson's supervisor was Mark Owens.

06-00:31:41  
Rubens: I got it. I got it.

06-00:31:42  
Coleman: So before I retired, we were friends. We didn't always have lunch, but we always --

06-00:31:49  
Rubens: You knew, and --

06-00:31:49  
Coleman: Yeah, we knew each other. But then when I became a Commandant and these guys had retired, I would call them. We'd talk about all kinds of stuff. But then when I retired out, I said, "Hey, let's get together." Conway Peterson lives not far from me, so I saw him, but then I work for Mark, and Mark's mother is very interesting. She ran the Republican party down in Orange County. [laughter] And she's 102 now.

06-00:32:14  
Rubens: Oh, my God.

06-00:32:16  
Coleman: But he has a fascinating story, because he was born in Japan, and his father -- well, it's a long story about Pearl Harbor. When we got involved.

06-00:32:24  
Rubens: But he's not part of --

06-00:32:27  
Coleman: He's UCLA!

06-00:32:28  
Rubens: No, no. But he's not part of Oakland Army Base, so I can't do him now. I can do him later as you're -- so you started that. You had another -- when did you retire from Alameda?

06-00:32:37  
Coleman: Alameda County? '98. No, '97.

06-00:32:41  
Rubens: You mean when they had you be the BRAC rep --

06-00:32:45  
Coleman: Yeah. Oh, I --

06-00:32:46  
Rubens: That was as a retired --

06-00:32:46  
Coleman: No, '97. Excuse me. I retired in '98, because I went to Africa. Yeah.

06-00:32:53  
Rubens: But you remained on that BRAC committee?

06-00:32:55  
Coleman: Yeah. See, okay. I was a county rep, but then they were looking for a community person from West Oakland. Well, I wasn't quite West Oakland, but I told these guys, I said, "Hey, guys." Well, it turned out they were looking for people who knew hazardous materials.

06-00:33:14  
Rubens: Yeah, what an idea! Plus, you knew the community.

06-00:33:16  
Coleman: And I knew the community. So they said, "Okay, we can take somebody outside of that." Well, they were looking for, then, people to review contracts, and check what's going on.

06-00:33:26  
Rubens: And that's when you --

06-00:33:27  
Coleman: So that's when I said, "Hey, I'll do this as a volunteer." And I kept doing it. And I just got that letter to disband it. Have you talked to George Carswell?

06-00:33:38  
Rubens: I have not. The guys did. I set it up, then I wasn't here.

06-00:33:40  
Coleman: No, I called him. I called him twice, and he hasn't responded to me.

06-00:33:43  
Rubens: Well, let me see if I can get you -- you keep that for now.

06-00:33:44  
Coleman: Well, see, because this letterhead is from Sacramento. Well, no, here's his phone number. His area code number.

06-00:33:50  
Rubens: Yeah, but I'm not sure that --

06-00:33:52  
Coleman: That's 910.

06-00:33:53  
Rubens: Let's just double check where it is. What did you do in Africa, by the way?

06-00:33:59  
Coleman: My dream. I drank martinis and looked at Kilimanjaro. I read *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* from under --

06-00:34:06  
Rubens: How long were you there?

06-00:34:08  
Coleman: A month and a half.

06-00:34:09  
Rubens: Oh, great.

06-00:34:11  
Coleman: Well, I left there and went to South Africa, because I had a friend in the South African Navy I met at the War College, so I spent a week down there with them.

06-00:34:18  
Rubens: Yeah. Great.

06-00:34:20  
Coleman: And I went on safari and all this other stuff. I just kicked back and did nothing.

06-00:34:25  
Rubens: Came back and did this?

06-00:34:27  
Coleman: I know, but what I ended up -- while I was there, as opposed to a vacation, I ended up teaching the natives basic health. These kids know nothing. Well, they're strictly out of the sticks, out of the mud. And I set up a program for how to deal with health. The resort was sold to an American company, and I spent three weeks, once a day, I'd lecture to these kids.

06-00:34:58  
Rubens: And then tell me one last thing, at what point did you get back involved with the ROTC at Berkeley?

06-00:35:05  
Coleman: Well, I came back -- when I came back from the War College and went in to look for the pictures and couldn't find them. So I got involved with the ROTC a year ago, because I had too many books and I didn't want to throw them away, so I had all my military books. I went to Col. Owens, who had been the vice president of the university, and he says, "Oh, give them to the ROTC program, Gordon. Go see this person." So I picked up the phone, called over there. The person was no longer there. Col. Roesler was there, and I said, "Well, I'm a graduate, and I've got some stuff. Are you interested?" Well, they had just moved. They were trying to build a library. So I walked in with two boxes of books and the lady went crazy!

06-00:35:49

Rubens:

And when did you give the talk? 2006, right? Not this year. December, 2006. Okay. All right. I'm going to stop this now, and we're going to plan what we're going to do. This is a great interview. This is a wonderful interview. Then we have to talk about BRAC, but I can't do --

[End of Interview 3]