

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Michael Godward Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Los Angeles, California
Length of Interview: 00:46:41
Interviewer: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: The tough question first, please say your name and spell it.

Michael Godward: Okay. Michael Godward. Last name is G-O-D-W-A-R-D.

MS: Michael, what year were you born and where were you born?

MG: I was born in 1947 at California Hospital in downtown Los Angeles. I am a third generation Los Angelino.

MS: Great. Tell us about your career. You went to school downtown LA, is that true?

MG: No, John. I grew up in my early years until 1958 in Los Angeles and was in the Los Angeles City School system in elementary school. Then my family moved to Covina, California where I attended high school from 1962 through [19]65.

MS: Then after high school, what did you do?

MG: After high school, I embarked on a career as a machinist apprentice. During the night, the Vietnam conflict and I was manufacturing rotor blades for helicopters – a subsidiary of the Bell Helicopter Company in Fort Worth, Texas.

MS: Then how did you get from that to – did you work in law enforcement and for the port?

MG: Well, law enforcement came about as a kind of diversion from my original plan. I was in the reserves in the Navy. I was an air crewman on a helicopter, and I was very interested in aircraft and maintenance. So, I attended Mount San Antonio Junior College and got an Associate in Science degree in aircraft maintenance science. It was my objective during that time to enter aircraft maintenance, but jobs were sparse. I was working for the city of Los Angeles then in the security component of public buildings downtown. I thought maybe it'd be interesting to leverage off of that initial indoctrination and to move into law enforcement. So, I applied for a job out at LAX and there's a security/police component. I was a boarding officer out there for a couple of years before transferring into the port police.

MS: Tell us about growing up here. Did you have any relations to the port of LA? Do you ever come down here? Do you know anything about it? Do you have any particular interest in it?

MG: John, quite honestly, I was only nodding – noddingly familiar with the fact that the port of Los Angeles existed as an entity of much like a lot of the citizenry here. They never got too much below Normandy and their travels throughout Los Angeles. Quite frankly, it was a kind of revelation to me to learn through some of my contacts at the airport about the existence of the Harbor Department and the port police. So, it was out of an eagerness to promote that I originally came down here.

MS: So, tell us the circumstances of you coming down here. How did you get transferred down here? What was your first job when you came down here?

MG: Well, I was originally trying to get promoted out of the boarding services component of the

airport police. It was a bifurcated type of organization where a cadre of people assigned to the screening stations, the pre-board screening stations. Then there was the main security component, the policing component that took care of the taxiways and the field site activities at the airport. There were no opportunities for promotion at the airport, but there were some opportunities that became available here at the port of LA. I found out about those through Fred Warner, who is the former chief. Actually, two chiefs were removed.

MS: So, when you came here, I would expect that there are some similarities, but also a lot of differences between an airport security system and a port security system. Can you talk about what you were discovering and had to learn about once you came here from the airport system?

MG: Well, the airport security component, John, to answer your question was –

MS: You can't use my name because no one knows who I am. So, just my questions aren't is. No one knows who John is, but it has not been a problem so far.

MG: Okay. All right. I am sorry. All right. Apologize.

MS: No. I always like to hear my name, but don't worry.

MG: Airport policing is different from city policing, as is the port policing. They are very specialized types of law enforcement. Most people have no idea just what kind of things they are focused upon. With the advent of 9/11, they are probably a little more conscious of the airport and their responsibilities. But possession of weapons or cutting instruments or any kind of gaseous materials are very much the focus of airport screening from a pre-boarding standpoint. That's the contact that most of the traveling public is familiar with. Port policing is so vastly divergent from what you would expect to see in city policing. I don't know where to begin to tell you, but I will try to give you a thumbnail sketch. Port policing encompasses about fourteen disciplines and bodies of law. I'll try to remember them because it's been almost seven years since I was up close and personal with those. First of all, we enforce the Penal Code. We did. I will never be retired completely.

MS: Forget you are retired. Speak as you speak for the department. Start again, first.

MG: We – to answer your question, John, we, the port police, are engaged in enforcement of the Penal Code of the State of California, the municipal code of the City of Los Angeles, the Bible, which dictates the operation of the port which is called the tariff. During my tenure, we were at tariff number 4. My gosh, we should be at 5 or 6 by now. That's a very living document. The majority of these provisions are misdemeanors if violated.

MS: Give me a definition of the tariff.

MG: The tariff of the Port of Los Angeles is the operational guide that dictates what may or may not be stored on a terminal, the character of storage of cargo aboard deep draft vessels. There was, once upon a time, something called the transit shed, which was a big warehouse which was right on the waterfront with the advent of containerization, which is the nuance in the movement

of cargo. Many of those are abandoned now and unnecessary. But we once inspected all of those, the contents in the proper separation of hazardous materials one from another, oils from oxygen from on and on. We enforced LA City fire codes in concert with the LA City Fire Department. Probably the most important duty of any port police officer is to maintain a liaison with the tenants. The port of LA has a landlord-tenant type relationship with the cargo carriers. They rent space from us, terminals from us, and thereby can operate in the conduct of importation of goods and exportation of goods. It's our job to keep them out of trouble as much as to slap their hand for violation of any of the provisions of the law. We're very successful in doing that.

MS: I mean, several entities that have some kind of supervisory or some kind of regulatory role here. I mean the LAPD, of course, the Fire Department, Coast Guard. How do you fit into that? Describe all those elements and how you fit into that constellation.

MG: Well, our interaction with all of the other agencies that conduct business in the port with respect to law enforcement, U.S. customs, the Coast Guard and the military, and the Police Department, requires that we maintain very close contact with them. We have deployed liaison personnel to go out and discuss various topics that we share in common. But more importantly than that, our relationship with the customers and the tenant of the Port is very –

MS: [coughs] I'm sorry. I might have to get a drink. Something went down wrong.

MG: Okay.

MS: Take a second here.

MG: I might –

MS: Would you like a drink too?

MG: Yes. I may impose upon you –

MS: Good. Well, that's why we're here. Let us take them one at a time. What's your relationship with the LAPD? How do you work with the LAPD?

MG: Working with the Los Angeles Police Department has been kind of a dynamic and ever-changing type relationship over time. When I first came to the port in 1979, we would stand shoulder to shoulder with Los Angeles Police Department officers. Taking essentially the same information from reporting parties, whether it be reporting a crime. We would fill out what we called the miscellaneous incident report which never saw the light of day with the LAPD. It had a completely different routing and it was confined to the Harbor Department alone. So, that relationship changed somewhat. The elimination of duplication of effort was the focus there as we became more and more trained attending the academies. In some cases, our officers went through the LAPD Academy. We relieve them the responsibility to respond to calls that were specifically in the port district. They were allowed to deploy elsewhere, and we started completing crime reports. But we have always used the LAPD booking facilities for arrestees. In

all cases when I first came to the port, their watch commanders were responsible for approving port police prepared reports. Now, they are reviewed by LAPD personnel but also reviewed and approved by our own in-house officers and command staff.

MS: Tell us about your relationship with the Coast Guard.

MG: Our relationship with the Coast Guard has always been very complimentary. We have supported them in implementing safety zones around vessels carrying LPG and CNG. We've attended classes in concert with them to fully understand their duties and responsibilities. Since my retirement, we have joined in concert with them in a program called Sea Marshalls. I really am not equipped to tell you all there is to tell you about that. That happened after my departure time.

MS: What about customs?

MG: Customs – your question is how did we interact with customs? We had a detective component within port police. We have worked on task forces with the customs service to abate any importation of contraband or illegal goods. That has been an ongoing thing, I believe it still exists.

MS: Now we have this new thing called Homeland Security. Do you have any special relations with them as well?

MG: I am unable to address the Homeland Security aspect. After 9/11, the entire world changed, including the Harbor Department. I retired from service in February of 2001, just seven months prior to that date. So, a whole myriad of things within the department and indeed within the port police have changed. So, I am really not equipped to address Homeland Security and just how much or little of our former responsibilities they have assumed.

MS: But you were here for another big security issue which was the Olympics, right?

MG: Yes, 1984.

MS: Tell me about the Olympics and what effect that had on the port police and your activities.

MG: You know the 1984 Olympics, which I likened somewhat to the 2001 computer shut down, the buckle that we're all afraid of. That was the big event that didn't happen. We were envisioning cars being parked on city freeways, that never happened. The pre-planning for the Olympics was so circumspect that many of the things that we feared never materialized. For the first few days of the Olympics, we were on what we call tactical alert, which is a little reconfiguration of our deployment. We were on two twelve-hour shifts as opposed to three eighth-hour shifts. So, we separated our personal resources into two shifts. After it became apparent that many of these things that we had feared during the [19]84 Olympics never materialized, we were able to quickly regroup and get back to business as usual.

MS: What kind of special training and preparation did you do in anticipation of the Olympics?

MG: What kind of special training did we do in preparation for the [19]84 Olympics? I really don't know. I'm glad to be out of the house today.

MS: [laughter] Well, let's talk about some anecdotal stories. What are some of the stories when you guys get together and talk about the famous cases and arrests, incidents, serious, funny, tragic. Give me some of the stories that you particularly recall in your years with the department. You have to stay back because of the microphone. Okay. Go ahead.

MG: Okay. What are some anecdotal remembrances of my time off duty or following shifts? Well, we had a favorite gathering place off-site, and when we were off duty where we would congregate and maybe in vibe and some of our favorite beverages. That was fairly commonplace. A lot of valuable exchange of information usually went on in these informal gatherings. The port is such a big place and envision three officers or four at the very most deployed throughout the port on any given shift. A whole lot goes on, that's invisible to the others. So, these gatherings, following a particular shift were always a good venue and an opportunity to exchange what had gone on.

MS: So, any particular stories you remember or encounters or arrests, events, whatever?

MG: So many. So, what are some of the contacts and the events that I remember as a young patrol officer? I remember one contact in particular. We noticed a suspect with a spray can over at one of our Harbor Department buildings. Obviously, he had just committed an act of graffiti application. We, my partner and I, stopped him and asked him to explain what he was doing there. He gave us some weak explanation. But continuing in our little field to interview him, we asked him if he had ever been arrested for burglary. His response was "No residential, commercial only," which I thought was kind of an interesting response. [laughter]

MS: Did you have enough to arrest him at that point?

MG: No, we did not. We didn't witness him applying the spray paint.

MS: What about things like contraband, drugs, smuggling, and things like that, did you get involve with those kinds of cases?

MG: Have we ever become involved in drug interdiction or arrests? Well, in fact, we've had some very, very large cases involving illegal smuggling of drugs. In about 1986, we employed a dive team and trained a cadre of officers to participate in underwater crime scene investigation and inspection of vessels. We were able to recover millions of dollars in one particular instance of cocaine, which was secreted in welded boxes inside the steering mechanism of what were called bow thrusters of a particular vessel. The first time anyone had ever seen this. But it was because of the expertise gained by our officers that they were able to identify these boxes suspended by ropes were out of place and recovered millions of dollars' worth of cocaine.

MS: So, these were boxes that were basically hanging down under? Were they underwater or were they hanging from ropes?

MG: They were underwater. They were below the water line secreted in the tunnel, which houses the bow thrusters. These are the propellers that propel the vessel sideways into the wharf to allow it to be tied up and secured to the wharf. They were aged and rusted to try to duplicate the interior cylinder of that tunnel and a very, very ingenious method of smuggling drugs. In one other instance, our officers, while on boat patrol, noticed a fishing vessel which was sitting extremely low in the water. You use that as a probable cause for boarding the vessel to investigate it. Using the Coast Guard's boarding authority, which we share, we're able to discover several millions of dollars' worth of marijuana.

MS: Going back to this first system, so the plan was those who are doing the smuggling would also dive under the water and then somehow retrieve those boxes. I mean, how would the smugglers get the stuff out [inaudible]?

MG: [cough] Pardon me. To retrieve the secreted contraband, yes, the smugglers would have to submerge and recover them from the vessel. These particular steering mechanisms were not accessible from the interior of the vessel. They would require a dive to recover them.

MS: So, in some ways it seems like a very ingenious way to secrete it. But in the other way, it seems sort of stupid. There are these divers now going on and coming up with this box. I mean, they might be observed doing that. It's the recovery process as could be as obvious as anything else, wouldn't it or –

MG: I think that the ingenuity of people intent on smuggling drugs just bounds endless. We have not yet seen all of the ingenious ways people can conceive.

MS: Now is drug smuggling the number one kind of criminal activity you're dealing with? What are the other criminal activities in some incidents connected to those?

MG: What are the principal areas of focus with the port police? Well, I would say there are two primary. That is to ensure that our tenants and operators of the terminals in our port have an uninterrupted conduct of their daily business. Trying to run referee over their interests versus the contract employees, the union folks. Just to eliminate any conflicts and or problems without siding with either one, but just being facilitators to solutions. The second primary focus is the abatement of container theft that is completely –

MS: Hold on one second. We have a little – [laughter]

MG: Yes.

MS: Give me a case that involved container theft that maybe have something that the department was involved with a particular incident.

MG: A single incident of container theft, I really couldn't isolate for you. But I can tell you that it was of such concern, not only in the port of Los Angeles, but in the port of Long Beach all over the country, ports of Boston, ports of New Orleans, and so forth. Any place where there are

containers transported through the port has been of particular concern. (Fast Gate?) taskforce was completed and put together involving the Sheriff's Department, the CHP, LAPD, the port police, the U.S. Customs Service, on and on.

MS: Well, explain to me what the (Fast Gate?) system was.

MG: I'm not familiar with the (Fast Gate?) system.

MS: You said you just said to me (Fast Gate?) was put together.

MG: A task force.

MS: A task force, okay.

MG: I'm so sorry. Yes, a task force was assembled, consisting of various law enforcement agencies that operate in and around the port of LA, including the Sheriff's Department, port police, LAPD, the Coast Guard, and CDHP. Anyone who could afford personnel to focus on this problem and to develop intelligence with imminent attempts at cargo theft. That whole discipline has been studied by these professional people. The methodologies of the perpetrator's operation have been studied at length and they were very successful in the recovery of stolen containers. So, we're very proud of that.

MS: Can you give us a little bit of the history of the port police, I mean, going back even before your time? How did they start as an organization and how have they changed over the years?

MG: I can go back to with respect to how port police has evolved as an organization. I can go back to about 1970 now. This is taken into account, (Fred Warners?), our former chief deputy's career. When he arrived in 1970, and this precedes me incidentally by nine years, the port police were basically a security officer group. Although they carried weapons and they had completed the basic 832 PC as it is known, of course, which essentially entitles them to carry firearms and to understand what use of deadly force is and when it shouldn't be used. But primarily, the port police were a security organization. They did issue a few moving violation citations in the port, a few parking citations. But far away, their basic responsibility was to observe and report to the LAPD which was the main enforcement arm of the city. But after (Fred Warners'?) arrival, being a retired LAPD officer, he recognized the need to professionalize the department. It was under his direction that we started to attend standardized academies. In the early years, we were using several. We used Rio Hondo, which is in the community college system. We use the LA County Sheriff's Department, whose responsibility is to train law enforcement personnel anywhere in the county. But we just couldn't push enough people through anyone at the time to be selective about selecting just one. In those years, the LA County Sheriff's Department did become our standard in about 1976. All of our people who came into the organization from that point on were trained there. It's now my understanding that the port police will be using exclusively the LA Police Academy. But the evolution in professionalism beginning in 1970 was really a dynamic period in a time of tremendous growth, standardization, and professional improvement.

MS: Change some tapes is good. So, talk about some of your thirty-plus years, you know, share with you some of the most memorable moments for you personally.

MG: What are some of the most memorable moments for me personally, for police? Well, I could tell you a lot of funny stories and I can tell you some very sad ones. Let me tell you a sad one. This was my really first exposure to how pressure and personal relationships can affect our police family. We really are a family. I've always considered every police officer, not only in our own little nucleus of port police, but throughout the country. If you're a police officer, there is an immediate bond. I was promoted to sergeant in 1986 and I probably had fifteen minutes and thirty seconds as a sergeant working the morning watch. One of my police officers, about ten years my senior, committed suicide while on duty. He took his service revolver and put it in his ear and pulled the trigger. I had been looking for him for about an hour when one of my other officers discovered him. That was very traumatic for me. I didn't have a lot of supervisory experience. I like to think that it wasn't because I was the new sergeant, that it was any causative factor, but he was having some problems at home. Kind of made me realize the need to have a holistic approach to dealing with people, subordinates, and superiors. Realize that they're not just employees, but they're human beings too. Yes. It was a wake-up call.

MS: Yes. That's a big kind of wake-up call. You said you had some funny stories to tell, what are those?

MG: Well, did we talk about my first assignment on the patrol boat? Let me tell you about my first time on the patrol boat where I showed up as a brand-new officer. My former chief from the Department of Airports was a good friend of my new chief at the port Police. They came out for a boat ride. I was going to show them the port from the waterside from our patrol boat. So, I was casting off the lines and got up on the bow of the patrol boat. The boat operator put the boat in reverse as I was letting go of the bow line, standing proudly on the bow. I went right head over heels into the drink, right into the slip. I made it kind of a squishy entrance into the locker room, and the watch commander came out to see what all the noise was. There I stood, dripping with my brand-new gun, my brand-new uniform, a police radio, and all of my regalia just soaking wet.

MS: If you ever have a thought that pilot did that on purpose seeing you out there?

MG: Yes. I did kind of think that had that played into it. He swore that he didn't and he's amongst the dearly departed, so I will not speak ill of him.

MS: So, some other stories, sad or happy.

MG: Well, I think one of the most shocking afternoons that I ever spent on port police was acting as a captain and carrying out my duties in our office when all of a sudden, a gunshot rang out in the office. I came to find out that the adjutant to the chief had – through no fault of his own, incidentally, had an accidental discharged his weapon. He actually ran into a light fixture, and it struck the hammer on his holstered weapon and discharged around through his buttocks and exited his hamster. I had a gun in my hand. I thought we were being taken over and under siege by some disgruntled employee or tenant or user of the port. It was a scary afternoon.

MS: Did you ever get into, or did you know of people who got into genuinely life-threatening encounters as part of their job?

MG: Well, yes. We want to define a life-threatening. I think anytime that you are part of a cadre of people who are trying to take down felons, people who have a great deal at stake either in a contraband that they possess or are trying to steal. It's life-threatening because they very often were in possession of weapons. Weapons, incidentally, that usually are far superior in firepower to those that are carried by the law enforcement personnel. So, every day that you put on a uniform, and take to the streets, and challenge people, you're in peril. There is no such thing as a routine traffic stop or a routine call. Everything has to be handled with the greatest degree of care.

MS: You have a particular incident in mind where the guns were drawn or not, that it was particularly tense?

MG: I personally don't. I'm among the fortunate ones who only had to draw my gun perhaps, three times in my entire career. You will hear about those of us that are fortunate. Others have been in multiple shootings throughout their career. There's no way to foretell.

MS: Can you talk about the experiences of others who were part of that more violent aspect of the job? Any particular stories?

MG: I really can't.

MS: What were the incidents then when you drew your weapon? What were the circumstances of that?

MG: I drew my weapon in instances where there were armed people. They were not drawing down on me, but I knew that they had a weapon in their hand. They didn't point it at me, but that was very tense.

MS: Give me those circumstances.

MG: Circumstances, making a vehicle stop, the driver gets out, has a gun in his hand, doesn't point it at me, but I can see that he is armed. Take up my combat stance, and command him to drop the weapon. Fortunately, he did.

MS: This is in the Port?

MG: Yes.

MS: So, what was he doing with the weapon walking around the port? What happened?

MG: What was he doing? He was simply driving his car and got out of his vehicle, and he had a gun in hand.

MS: It's not so smart.

MG: Not really. No, it could have gone –

MS: Bad for him.

MG: Badly.

MS: I'm sort of asked this in other ways, but from a law enforcement point of view, are there situations that you get into in the port that other law enforcement agencies don't get into? In other words, circumstances where you're doing your job that an LAPD guy or sheriff guy would never really get into because you're working in the port?

MG: Are there differences between the kinds of calls or activities port police engage in versus those LAPD typically engage in? Well, yes, there are. It's because of the customized service that we provide and the body of enforcement that we are focused on in the port are so vastly different from those in city police are typically engaged in. For instance, they wouldn't typically aboard a ship and look for all the spaces that could contain gaseous emissions. They wouldn't look for flame screens aboard a tank vessel. They wouldn't look for communication between persons on board, the watches that are on board the vessel and in the sheds that are landside. They wouldn't, for instance, enter into a warehouse and look for separation of a particular cargo that is incompatible with each other. So, they wouldn't be looking for oil sheens on the surface of the water and trying to find a source. They wouldn't be looking for booms placed around bunker barges, those barges that transfer fuel onto the deep draft ships that frequent the port. So there, it's a very specific discipline and it draws from Coast Guard responsibilities, LA City Fire responsibilities, and that's not to diminish what city police do. They're very good at what they do. It's just that they aren't trained or focused so much on those things that are indigenous to the port.

MS: From what you know about port security operations and different ports around the country, I'm sure you've got some pride about your own port. How would you describe or rate or present the port police in San Pedro Harbor, LA Harbor, compared to other ports? Is this a basic average operation or sub-average? Or is it really one of the superior law enforcement port law enforcement organizations?

MG: How do I feel port police in Los Angeles rate amongst other port policing agencies? Well, you can assign whatever value to my commentary that you would like because I am prejudiced. But I do know being totally objective that the Los Angeles port police are amongst the most highly trained port policing entity not only in the nation, but anywhere in the world. That level of expertise is growing exponentially since I've departed the port. So many nuances have come into port policing and the level of training has improved far above what it was when I departed. So, I'm very proud to have participated and have been engaged in port policing during my time. I'm just in awe of what it's become since I've left. So, I would have to say it is number one or equal to number one anywhere in the world.

MS: Can't have a better end than. Hold on a second. If you want to slide over, I'm going to take a still photo of you.

MG: Okay.

[end of transcript]