

Interview with **Philip Watkins**

Date: March 15, 1989

Interviewer: James A. DeVinney

Camera Rolls: 2106-2107

Sound Rolls: 249-250

Team: B

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Philip Watkins, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on March 15, 1989 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2106]

[sound roll #249]

[slate]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] [pause] OK. Clap it.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Everyone down. Camera's running.

00:00:28:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me about what the prison was like before the riots.

00:00:31:00

Philip Watkins:

Well, before the riot, we seemed to be getting along with the, the population we had. Of course, they had a [scratching sound] riot in Rikers Island, and they had one in Auburn, and within a period of time, I'm talking maybe about a year, we—

00:00:53:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now let me just stop you. Don't scratch because that's picking up on the sound, OK?
OK. OK within, within the last few months.

00:01:01:00

Philip Watkins:

Within a year or so we inherited all these [pause] ringleaders maybe, from the riots in Rikers and Auburn and they put 'em in Attica because I think they thought Attica was a, a secure place to hold 'em. And I feel that maybe this, we just overlaid—loaded the guys that wanted prison reform or were just rebelli—rebellious.

00:01:34:00

Interviewer:

Now the day that the riot began, tell me where you were and what happened when it all broke out?

00:01:40:00

Philip Watkins:

I was assigned to D Block yard and I just, we knew there was something happening so, and I went in the corridor under Times Square and looked in the A Block yard and I s—I could see they lost A Block. And I went back out in the yard, but there was guys that—down raising hell down at Times Square. But I thought the place was secure. So I went back out in the yard and, phew, maybe ten minutes later [pause] twenty minutes later maybe, guys started coming through the door in the yard. So they, that was after they, they took over Times Square. And—

00:02:39:00

Interviewer:

Tell me what happened to you.

00:02:43:00

Philip Watkins:

Well a couple guys jumped me and whooped on me a little bit. I got a broken arm out of it. Guy hit me with a shovel. And then another inmate come out and said that was enough. And then they took me over in a area that wasn't, there was nothing going on and I got myself together a little bit.

00:03:12:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down a little bit, make sure all the systems are working. I just want to pull a short stop here.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Philip Watkins:

They give me some—

Interviewer:

OK. I'm counting.

Philip Watkins:

—inmate's clothing—

Camera crew member #1:

Five.

Philip Watkins:

—and they thought at this time they should get me out of there, but I refused to leave.

Interviewer:

OK. And that's because your arm was broken—

Camera crew member #1:

Ten seconds.

Philip Watkins:

Because my arm was broken, and it was quiet out in the yard then. They just come over and bang. They banged everybody out and then they left.

Interviewer:

Don't tell it now. Hold it, and let's pick it up, all right?

Philip Watkins:

OK.

[picture resumes]

00:03:41:00

Camera crew member #1:

It's rolling now for at least ten seconds. [pause] OK. Clap it.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:03:54:00

Interviewer:

All right. Your arm has just been broken and you've been sort of taken in by a couple of these inmates. Tell me what happened.

00:03:59:00

Philip Watkins:

OK. Well, a couple in—an inmate—I got my arm broken, and then they took me over into a quiet area in the yard and a couple friendly inmates come over and t— and brought some, after a period of time, maybe ten, fifteen minutes, some inmates brought me over some inmate clothing, and took my uniform off so I wouldn't be recognized by the militant inmates. They thought at the time that they could get me out of the yard and get me out of the—maybe out of the property institution where I'd be most secure. At that time, the yard was quiet because the inmates that were taking over the institution come out and just, there was three CO's out in the yard at the time. They [pause] they hurt 'em or put 'em out of commission and there was no more CO's out in the yard that could do anything. But the yard was quiet, so I decided to stay there. I didn't want to go back in the corridor in the, or in the cell block to try to get out because that's where they were—was—there was a lot of commotion and trouble in there.

00:05:32:00

Interviewer:

So did you finally end up in the yard with a number of other guards who were also being held hostage?

00:05:36:00

Philip Watkins:

Yeah. OK. Now they started, after a period of time they started bringing other hostages out in the yard. In fact, I wasn't even recognized for a while, but then, all of a sudden, inmates that recognized me, said, Well, there's another CO or another guy, bring him over here with the rest of the guys.

00:05:59:00

Interviewer:

OK. And which, which prisoners, who were some of the prisoners right about that time that were watching you most closely?

Philip Watkins:

Who were, I don't—

Interviewer:

Well, I'm, I'm not quite sure what I'm looking for. But I guess I'm trying to get a sense of who you were confronting at that point, you know. Were, were, what, what was it like? Was it scary? Were you threatened?

00:06:17:00

Philip Watkins:

No, I wasn't too scared at that time. No. You know, you got roughed up a little bit, but I wasn't scared. I don't want you mean, mean by who were they.

00:06:32:00

Interviewer:

I didn't know if these were people that were threatening to you or were they—

Philip Watkins:

They were inmates, no, they weren't threatening to me, no.

Interviewer:

Why not?

00:06:41:00

Philip Watkins:

Well, because they were trying to help me.

00:06:43:00

Interviewer:

OK. All right. OK, let's stop down for just a moment.

[cut]

00:06:54:00

Camera crew member #3:

It's already two, and I have speed.

Camera crew member #1:

Slate when you're ready.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:07:04:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me how you started to become aware of the change?

Philip Watkins:

Well, the inmates that were--

Interviewer:

OK. But start, "At first you didn't," at first you didn't think it was gonna be too long. Tell me that.

Philip Watkins:

OK. At first, we're bringing, the inmates are bringing hos—COs, hostages—

Interviewer:

No, no, no, no, no. You said, At first I didn't think it was gonna be too long. That's what I want. But then, when did it change?

Philip Watkins:

[pause] [laughs]

Interviewer:

OK, stop down, stop down. I didn't mean to confuse you. No, when we were, when we were talking there you said, Well, at first we thought it was only gonna be a few hours, but then—

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

OK. Well, the words were, and I don't mean to put words into your mouth, but they're your words. So let me do it for you. Just a moment, it was, you said, "At first, we thought it would all be over in a few hours." But then they—

Philip Watkins:

Yeah. OK.

Interviewer:

—something starts to happen. OK?

00:07:55:00

Philip Watkins:

Now a group forms, right? Is this—

[picture resumes]

00:07:56:00

Interviewer:

OK. I want you to start out by saying, "At first we thought it was all gonna be over in a few hours and then something happened." And you tell me what—

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

—happened.

Philip Watkins:

OK.

Interviewer:

OK.

00:08:07:00

Philip Watkins:

OK, as I was in the yard, the inmates were bringing other hostages out in the yard and they formed a group of hostages. I think there was forty? Eventually the group'd grow to about forty, or so. We all thought at the time that it'd be over in a matter of six, eight hours. Then, of course, it started getting dark and we knew they wouldn't come in and secure the prison after dark. We knew the state troopers were coming in and then we knew that we were in a world of trouble. That we just, we just thought that the, the prison would be retaken immediately, but it wasn't. And as time went on, we knew it, we were in for a long siege. And certainly after the negotiators started comin' in and the, these other people that they let in, the observers, then we knew we were, it was bad times.

00:09:29:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the observers.

Philip Watkins:

Tell you about the observers? Well, the observers come in and they, they certainly didn't help the situation.

Interviewer:

Tell me how they didn't help. I don't know what you mean when you said they didn't help. What, why, why, why didn't they help? What was wrong?

00:09:49:00

Philip Watkins:

Well, they just [pause] I think Commissioner Oswald let 'em in figuring that they would, he'd given the—this inmate demand that they needed observers. And he let 'em in and they, they just deteriorated. They encouraged the inmates [pause] for, to stand up for their rights and get the—more demands and stuff.

00:10:22:00

Interviewer:

So, they became part of the problem.

00:10:24:00

Philip Watkins:

Yeah, certainly. They were, they were as much a [pause] a lead in this riot as the leaders were.

00:10:37:00

Interviewer:

Who, who stands out in your mind among the observers? I don't know who the observers were.

Philip Watkins:

I, I think of, I can't name 'em, there was, well certainly Kunsable [sic] was on the inmates' side.

Interviewer:

Kunstler?

Philip Watkins:

Kunstler, yeah.

Interviewer:

What'd he do?

00:11:00:00

Philip Watkins:

Well he just, you know, more and more, he was, Stand up for your rights. I mean, I don't know what he did, but he certainly, enticed 'em for more—

00:11:14:00

Interviewer:

What about the issue of race? Do you think race was an issue here?

00:11:20:00

Philip Watkins:

Yeah, I do.

00:11:21:00

Interviewer:

OK. I, nobody knows, Yeah—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

—because they don't hear my question. You have to talk—OK hold on.

[cut]

[camera roll #2107]

00:11:28:00

Camera crew member #1:

Eight, nine, all right, we're ten seconds into the roll.

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera crew member #1:

Slate it.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Camera roll twenty-one, oh-seven.

Interviewer:

OK, Bob?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah. The camera's ready.

00:11:41:00

Interviewer:

OK. I'd just like to go back now. It, it seems to me, from some of the things that I've heard and read, that there was a real issue, that it was kind of a Black and White kind of an issue. Can you explain that?

00:11:51:00

Philip Watkins:

I think the inmates were probably just as racist as, some of the inmates were just as racist as some of the CO's. I mean, this is just a natural thing in any group of people. I don't think the guards at Attica were any more racist than, as a group, than any other group of people.

00:12:19:00

Interviewer:

Uh-huh. How did that exhibit itself, if I could just ask you?

Philip Watkins:

I don't know—

Interviewer:

Bobby Seale came in at one point.

00:12:28:00

Philip Watkins:

Bobby Seale.

00:12:29:00

Interviewer:

Tell me what happened with Bobby Seale.

00:12:30:00

Philip Watkins:

Bobby Seale, in my opinion, come in and when he would see what was happening, I don't think Bobby Seale wanted to get involved. In fact, the way I understand it, he come up to the institution and the institution wouldn't let him in and he left back for Buffalo and the state troopers had to go get him and bring him back. And then they let him in, and he didn't seem to want to get involved, as far as I was concerned. I think the inmate population was awful disappointed with Bobby Seales [sic].

00:13:09:00

Interviewer:

What did they say?

Philip Watkins:

Because he didn't get more involved in it.

Interviewer:

Did they talk about it? I mean, could you overhear any conversations?

Philip Watkins:

Well, yeah, yeah, you could tell.

Interviewer:

What did they say?

00:13:19:00

Philip Watkins:

I don't know that they said. You know, it, it just seemed like they thought he would [scratching sound] probably get right down with 'em and fight for their rights and he didn't want to get involved in it.

00:13:32:00

Interviewer:

OK. I thought you had overheard some conversation.

00:13:33:00

Philip Watkins:

No, no, we didn't, we weren't that—

00:13:35:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, you were in, you were in uniform at this point, and you were blindfolded. Tell us about the blindfold situation.

00:13:41:00

Philip Watkins:

The blindfold situation was terrible. If you wanted to be blindfolded for three days, although they did take 'em off once in a while, and you could see down underneath 'em once in a while, you know. But it was, it was, it was terrible. You, you just imagine the noises that you heard and couldn't see what was going on. You just thought, when they took our blindfolds off, I was surprised that the, the institution wasn't ground level, all the noise and stuff, it was scary.

00:14:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, I want to stop down just a little bit because I'm worried about the sound roll. Change the sound roll and let's get right back into it.

Camera crew member #1:

Very well—

[cut]

[sound roll #250]

00:14:25:00

Camera crew member #1:

Cameras are rolling, Chuck.

Camera crew member #2:

Yep, got it.

Camera crew member #2:

What'd you say?

Camera crew member #1:

I have ten seconds.

Interviewer:

OK. We're going.

Camera crew member #1:

Camera roll twenty-one, oh-seven. Sound two five oh. Quiet, please. Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:14:41:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me what happens when they get ready for the takeover.

00:14:43:00

Philip Watkins:

Well this, the inmates kind of thought that there was gonna be a takeover. All the hostages were assigned one or two inmates that were their, I'm going to say, quote, "executioners". They took some hostages up on the tunnels. Fortunately, I wasn't one of 'em that went up on the tunnels because they were right at the blunt of the takeover. The [sighs] inmate that was assigned to me—of course I was blindfolded at the time—didn't say too much. I believe he was a Muslim 'cause he was quoting scriptures and I thought. I'd better start talking to this guy. So, I asked him if he knew an inmate by the name of Red Richardson, that was an awful

popular inmate, and he was assigned to me for maybe three or four years. Well, I asked him this question, and he says, Yeah, I know you too, Curly. And when he told me that he knew me, I felt [sighs] a lot more safer than I felt before I knew he knew me. And [pause] the only thing that I had to do for him is when the helicopters come over, he, he fell down on his back, and he'd pull me over on top of him and this happened a couple times as the helicopters were making their pass. And during these times he pulled my he—my blindfold off. And then I, after he pulled my blindfold off, I could see that the troopers were already on the tunnels. And they had their guns aimed down into the yard and I knew this guy wasn't gonna hurt me after that. So, I, I, I released myself from him, and I started running and I made contact with a trooper and the trooper escorted me up a ladder out of the yard, and—

00:17:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. I'm gonna stop you, because I want you to back up. You were still in a prison uniform at this point. So how did they, they recognize you? Tell me what happened when they first saw you?

Philip Watkins:

Well, as I was, after I got away from the, the inmates, the inmate that was holding me, there was a—other guards, down in the yard that were in the, the group of inmate, group of hostages and when I got down, this trooper, this trooper actually put a gun on me, but I told him I was a, a CO and then he got the high sign from a—

Interviewer:

OK. But I, you have to tell me the story and tell me that you were in uniform because we don't know that. They, they haven't—

00:18:07:00

Philip Watkins:

I was, I was in inmates clothing. OK? All through the riot I was in an inmate's clothing. And then, I'm running. OK, this trooper might have thought I was an inmate, but he told me to hit the ground and I did hit the ground, and then I told him I was a hostage and they had officers go into the yard with the troopers to help identify us. And one of the officers that did go into the yard identified me and then he took me up the ladder after I was identified. Before that, the weapon was on me.

00:18:56:00

Interviewer:

I want to back up just a little bit, because when you were getting ready for the takeover, executioners—

Philip Watkins:

Quote.

Interviewer:

—were being assigned, and what was, what were some of the other guards doing? There were a lot of hostages there. How did some of the other guards seem to be responding and behaving?

Philip Watkins:

Well everybody was—OK, the other—everybody was scared. I was scared. [pause] A lot of guys were praying. A lot of guys were praying. A lot of the inmates were praying, OK?

Interviewer:

It sounds like everybody was scared, not just guards—

Philip Watkins:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

—but inmates, too

00:19:39:00

Philip Watkins:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. Certainly.

[door opens]

00:19:39:00

Interviewer:

Yeah. That must have caused a little bit of bonding between the guards and the inmates [door closes] that there must've been some people felt pretty close then.

00:19:46:00

Philip Watkins:

Well, it did, yeah.

00:19:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's just stop down. We might be at the end. I just want to kind of review the questions a little bit.

[cut]

00:19:54:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK. Cameras rolling.

Camera crew member #2:

Camera's rolling.

Camera crew member #3:

And I have ten seconds.

Camera crew member #1:

OK. All right. Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

OK. Camera's ready.

00:20:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. Just go ahead. You know—

00:20:10:00

Philip Watkins:

OK. After the, the, the inmates circ—the hostage circle was formed and the inmates had all the hostages they could get formed into a circle, we thought, as a group, that the, that the, our fellow CO's and CO's from other institution that were called in, would retake it almost immediately. And when it wasn't taken immediately, the longer it went on, come—of course, come nightfall, we knew they weren't gonna come in. But the longer they didn't come in and retake it, the more, the more the inmates felt they were in control. OK?

00:21:03:00

Interviewer:

OK. And what did they want to do with that control, when they thought they had it?

00:21:05:00

Philip Watkins:

Well, the more control they, they got, the more demands they made. I think one of the bad parts about the negotiations were, is Commissioner Oswald come in and he'd, he'd give 'em, ten, ten of the points they wanted right off the bat but he didn't get anything in return. I feel, you know, in negotiations, you negotiate something, you give 'em something and the inmates give up something. It seemed like he'd give up s—he'd give up ten, twelve points and n—OK, the inmates didn't have to give up anything. Maybe if, when he give up ten points, let ten hostages go. But he didn't do this. He just, I don't know, maybe he felt by the more they give him, the more they'd soften. But it seemed to me like the more he give 'em the harder they got.

00:21:59:00

Interviewer:

OK. What about, was there much communication between the guards, because you said, We thought that it would all be over. Did you have a chance to talk to each other?

00:22:08:00

Philip Watkins:

Well, some. Yeah, we talked amongst each other a little bit but not that much, no. That was controlled by the inmates, yeah.

00:22:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. How much time you got, Bob?

Camera crew member #1:

I must be just about out. I probably got another half a minute.

Interviewer:

OK. Let, let me just stop down on that roll. Let's throw in one magazine and just do one or two questions in a row here. I think we're—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:30:00

Copyright 2021 Washington University Libraries