

Interview with **Howard Holland**

Date: June 6, 1989

Interviewer: Sheila Bernard

Camera Rolls: 2142-2143

Sound Rolls: 267

Team: C

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 Howard Holland, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on June 6, 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 #2142]

[sound roll #267]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Interviewer:

Thanks. If you could just tell me a little bit about who you were and, and how you felt when you first got into Detroit.

00:00:19:00

Howard Holland:

Well, we had moved to Detroit when I was about ten years old from middle Tennessee. I'd been raised on a, on a farm, born in a farmhouse there, then came up to the city and we lived out in Mt. Clemens for quite a while, and then moved to Roseville. In 1966 I had joined the Guard and was looking for something to do with my life so I decided to join the Guard and make a career out of that at the time. And I'd been in, joined in March of '66 and I went to

basic training and went to my advanced skill training and then went on to jump school and the Airborne School at Fort Benning. And then came back. I got back about October of '66. And I guess at the time, I had been reading and, watching television and reading articles in the paper about Watts and out in the Los Angeles area and the disturbances they were having out there, and Newark, New Jersey was at that time. And I knew that part of the Guard mission was to—community involvement, as far as protect citizens and to help out with floods and snowstorms and things of that nature. We were always told if there were any civil disturbances like there were in the '30s with the labor strike in Detroit that we'd be committed to duty at that time. And I was out on the beach with my girlfriend, up Metropolitan Beach here in, near, north of Detroit. And apparently the Guard had called my house at the time. My dad was on the phone, had to go down to the park office and call home, and he told me that they'd alerted the Guard and I was to come and report immediately. And so I, we ran home. I dropped, the girl I was with, dropped her off at home.

00:02:05:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop for a second. I need you to stop for just a sec.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Howard Holland:

That's all right.

Interviewer:

This is, it's—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

00:02:09:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marker.

[slate]

00:02:11:00

Interviewer:

OK. So you get the call.

00:02:12:00

Howard Holland:

OK. So I got the call and immediately I went home, packed my stuff that I had at the house and threw it in the car and drove down to the Armory. And we got down to the Armory and they issued us any additional equipment we needed or if we were short equipment, they gave it to us. And then they put us in the back of two-and-a-half ton trucks, at the time, and we headed downtown Detroit. I had really never spent any time in downtown Detroit, having lived mostly in the suburbs. I was 20 years old, been in the Guard just barely a year-and-a-half at the time. I really didn't know what to expect, but I'd seen the stories of Watts and Newark and that on television and had no idea what to expect in Detroit. On the way down there, looking out the back of the truck, I did notice that, there were fires, the smoke was pretty heavy at that time initially, and there were many fires going on. You'd see occasionally fire trucks running everywhere, hoses laid across Grand River, you know, major highways, and just trucks bouncing over 'em to get there. And I would look out and I'd see people carrying some things out of stores or they'd been li—windows had been broken, some of the stores were on fire and there still people going into the stores with them on fire even.

00:03:31:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop. That was great, thank you.

[cut]

00:03:34:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

00:03:36:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marker.

[slate]

00:03:38:00

Howard Holland:

We initially went in, we got off the trucks and organized, and I was selected as one of the people to accompany police officers in squad cars at the time. There were two or three different functions that the Guard was doing. And myself and another Guardsman were placed into a squad car with two Detroit police officers. And our basic duty at that time was to travel around, and having—not being familiar with the city, I really had no idea where I was and I'd never spent any time there. But our duty was to go out, as we observed people that were looting stores and things, we were to stop them. Basically apprehend them and bring them back to the police station where they were booked and, and whatever they did with it from there. And the first three days, to describe a single day would be difficult because basically the first three days was one long day. We didn't have any, very much rest or sleep. The only time we got to rest was between runs back and forth to the police precinct we were at, at the time. But we would find people, just drive. We would respond to radio calls, pick 'em up, take 'em back, drop 'em off and just head back out to the streets. And for about three days and nights that's, that's all we did. That's just a—

00:04:56:00

Interviewer:

What was the scariest moment in that period?

00:05:00:00

Howard Holland:

Well, I guess the scariest moment was when we, people would stop us and say some people just went into the store here and the police officers, they were trained at that time, of course with police techniques, and they would go into the store and, and the Guardsmen would remain outside and just provide protection to the police officers at that point, so they could do their duties. We didn't have arrest powers as Guardsmen, the policemen did. And I guess my biggest fear was one of these times getting out of the car and having someone not like the power authority of military and police in their city and not knowing what would happen every time we stepped out of that car or approached a building or, you know, go up to a car that was on fire or something and see if there was anybody in it so we could help them out. And that was basically the biggest fear. At night time, the first three days, when they tried to enforce a curfew real strict, we'd pick up curfew violators as well. And you just couldn't see anybody at night in the city, so many corners and back alleys. And even the main streets looked like there were just—it was scary at times.

00:06:16:00

Interviewer:

Well, streetlights had been shot out, hadn't they? I mean, you couldn't see very well.

00:06:20:00

Howard Holland:

No, really couldn't see very well at night depending. It, the first couple or three nights probably was not as bad as, as the television crews and papers all over the country depicted it. The people would help you considerably. They would call us over and say, you know, there's somebody into that store, or somebody's breaking into that house down there, they're not home but, you know, we don't want our neighbors' houses broken into, and things like that. And—

00:06:50:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

I'm sorry.

Howard Holland:

That's all right.

Interviewer:

If you could, describe that, the sense of being in, in Detroit in terms of what you were doing and what's happening—

[picture resumes]

Camera Crew Member #2:

This'll be take four. Take four.

Interviewer:

—and also, when we talked, it was interesting, you made a comparison to your brother's experience that I thought was interesting.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

00:07:16:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marker.

[slate]

00:07:18:00

Interviewer:

So if you could just talk about what it is that's happening and—

00:07:21:00

Howard Holland:

Well, I'm, as I went along through the city, I guess my initial feeling was, you know, how can people be doing this to their own hometown, that they have to live there when this is over and they're burning down homes and businesses and, and literally putting people out of business. And I guess one correlation that was, at the time, my mother had received a letter from my brother who was over in Vietnam at the time *and I got a chance to sneak a phone call home one night just to let my parents know I was all right, 'cause it'd been three or four days since I'd let 'em know what was going on. And my mother expressed a, a thought then, and I guess it's stuck in my mind ever since, said, Here I have one son in Vietnam in a combat zone and now I'm worried about you in our own hometown, you know you—downtown Detroit*, and you're getting shot at and things like that. I tried to tell her I would, you know, that we were well protected and that it wasn't as bad as it was being depicted on the televisions and that, but she was concerned. You know, had one, as I say, one brother in combat with all the people in Vietnam getting killed and my brother had written a letter that she received during the disturbance.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:08:38:00

Interviewer:

Well, how were you, how were you feeling by, I mean by—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Roll out.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I'll come out. But it was just now?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yes, ma'am.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #2143}

00:08:46:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marker.

[slate]

00:08:48:00

Interviewer:

OK. So you snuck a phone call home.

00:08:50:00

Howard Holland:

Yeah. And I had a chance to, we finally snuck a phone call home. By the time I got to Southeastern, it was about the end of the third day, into the morning of the fourth day. And my mother was, I got a chance to talk to her, tell her I was OK, and she had said that she'd received a letter from my brother, at the time, and he had heard that there were disturbances in California and New Jersey and now Detroit, at the time. And my mother expressed a concern that she had one son in, in combat, at war, you know, with an enemy, at the time, and she never dreamed that her other son would wind up in her own hometown, perhaps facing the same dangers and chance of getting injured or, or even killed, at one time. So, tried to calm her down so she wouldn't worry as much. But it, it was an interesting.

00:09:47:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about what it was like the, the time you were put on a roadblock? What happened?

00:09:51:00

Howard Holland:

Well, one night, after they took us off the patrol and put us back in Southeastern High School at the time, or Durfee Junior High, which was next door I believe, and put out on a road block at night, and our mission, we were there with two police cars, that had a policeman in each of them and two Guardsmen. And we would take turns stopping traffic and checking for their passes to be out at night, and shift workers and things. And I think it was about two o'clock in the morning, this one car approached and slowed down just like every other car had, at the time, and then got a little closer and turned down his lights and just floored it and decided to come right through the road block. And the other Guardsman that was with me, I don't remember his name now, we just literally dove to opposite sides of the road and this car just went right on through the roadblock and went down the street, was swerving. Police officers came up and fired a couple of rounds and, of course, jumped in their police cars and followed after them and came back about an hour later and they had told us that they had caught, there were four people in the car and they found a couple guns and knives and things in the car. But I guess that was the first time somebody actually tried to run me over. So, I had a concern at the time.

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

So was that the only time you saw weapons discharged during the—

00:11:15:00

Howard Holland:

It's the only time I personally saw it, yes. It was, it was the police officers that were firing. I never, I think I went down there, initially we had M-1's at the time, had eight round clips, and I was issued my rounds and wound up turning my rounds back in.

00:11:32:00

Interviewer:

When, when you were on the street on, in the area, could you hear? What did it sound like? What did you hear?

00:11:36:00

Howard Holland:

Well, it sounded, a lot of sirens all over the place of course. The fire, firemen responding to the fires and bombings and things of this nature and police cars going in and ambulances going back and forth. It was something I'd never experienced before. As young as I was at the time I, I really didn't know what was going on and I just couldn't believe it, at the time, that people would be doing this to their own, where they lived, to their own city, so—

00:12:07:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK. If you could just finish your thought. I didn't mean to interrupt it, you didn't go there—wait for this truck. [motorcycle passes] Motorcycle.

00:12:23:00

Howard Holland:

A loud one.

00:12:27:00

Interviewer:

OK. What were you saying?

00:12:27:00

Howard Holland:

That we didn't, the Guard did not go into, you know, I'm looking just from a, a soldier viewpoint at this time, the Guard did not go into the, Detroit to be big bad boys of summer, or to be the conquering military force. We went in there to protect the citizens of Detroit. We didn't go in there to destroy the citizens, or—we did it to protect the property, to protect the firemen, the policemen, the utility workers, and to protect the people so they would have a city. A majority of the Guard was from the city of Detroit. Detroit feeds the entire surrounding community here, always has, and a lot of people that were downtown, a lot of Guardsmen, they were from the city of Detroit, and it was their home, and they were there to protect their own home. That's what we were there for and that's what the greatest majority of us saw our mission was is to protect citizens in, you know, in the city. They were very, very kind to us while we were there. I remember, I had some of the greatest food I ever ate during the disturbance. They would just bring it up to the, to the gates of the, of the schools we were staying at and offer it to us and, and just not accept money. That was some of the best memories I had about the situation.

00:13:41:00

Interviewer:

Do you remember one specifically?

00:13:44:00

Howard Holland:

Across from Southeastern I had this one lady that, she would just bring huge platters of pork chops up to the gate and offer it to us. And as, and the guys would come, and they would want to pay her for it, you know. And, and she just wouldn't accept any money. And as soon as she finished that one platter she'd go back, an hour later come back with another huge platter. It'd be pork chops or fried chicken or something. And it got to the point where people would go over there and ask where she is if she wasn't there for an hour. And, but it was nice, you know. The kids would, the kids would want to come into the school yard and, of course, they couldn't come in because it would basically violate security and that. But they would want to come in and talk to us and things of that nature. But the people, that was one of the best memories I had was the people.

00:14:34:00

Interviewer:

Cut. That's great. OK. Well, thank you, is there anything that I haven't asked you?

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hit it.

00:14:42:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marker.

[slate]

00:14:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. If you could, just tell me again about the worst thing you saw.

00:14:48:00

Howard Holland:

Well, I guess the worst thing I saw was, we were out one, I believe it was a late afternoon, it was still daylight but not quite dark, and we had gone into this one store and it was, the front had all been burnt out, black from soot and, obviously the, you know, firemen had s—already been there and there was water dripping. And we had went in to search to see if there was anybody in there with the police officers and we went to the back and it was a store room or a meat locker or a cooler of some sort, and we opened it up and there was this guy just huddled up, you know, afraid that we had come back, that we were there to do him some harm. And he had said, he basically, he lost everything, he'd lost his store and was probably considered, you know, what did they come back for, you know, I'm the only thing left here that I have, so he thought we were more people coming in to do harm to his store or to his, to him or something. And we assured him that we weren't, and we escorted him outside and—

00:15:49:00

Interviewer:

Let me interrupt you, let me interrupt you. Can you tell me one more time, just very briefly, not about your brother hearing about the, the riots, but just about your mom comparing the two of you?

Howard Holland:

Oh, OK. My mother had a son in, in—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Excuse me.

Interviewer:

Starting with you had the chance to make a phone call.

00:16:06:00

Howard Holland:

OK. I'll go back to all that. I had a chance to sneak a phone call out one time after the first three or four days we were there. And most of us when we had the chance, called home to let our relatives and wives and mothers and fathers know we were OK. And my mother had made an analogy, I guess, that here she had one son in Vietnam at the time, and she was constantly afraid for him in Vietnam. It was a, a rough time, '66, '67, pre-Tet I war offensive and that. And she was always afraid that, you know, he wouldn't come back from the war. And yet now, I went down to the city of Detroit and I was also, she was thinking, here my other son is now getting shot at, he may be killed in his own hometown, you know. There's a chance that he could come to harm and be killed, and it's in his own hometown, didn't have to be in a war zone at the time. And she was worried all of a sudden, instead of one son, worried about two sons getting hurt or injured, or even killed, so—

00:17:07:00

Interviewer:

Thanks. OK, cut. I think—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:17:14:00

Copyright 2021 Washington University Libraries

