

The University of Baltimore is launching a two-year investigation called “Baltimore’68: Riots and Rebirth,” a project centered around the events that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and their effects on the development of our city. UB administration and faculty members in the law school and in the undergraduate departments of history and community studies are planning a series of projects and events to commemorate the 40th anniversary of this pivotal event. We are currently working with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Maryland Public Television and the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries to pursue funding for projects that may include conferences, a website and a library traveling exhibit.

Your potential participation in an oral history project would contribute to the very foundation of this project – the memories of Baltimoreans who lived through the riots and saw the changes that came about in response to them. Your life story can fill in the limited knowledge we learn from newspaper accounts and the television footage.

If you choose to participate in the project you would be interviewed by students from the University of Baltimore. They will ask you questions, but your memories will determine the direction of the interviews.

If you agree to serve as an oral history informant in this project, you will meet with a team of undergraduate students. The students will take a still photograph of you. In addition, if you have a photo of yourself in or around 1968, we would greatly appreciate it if we could borrow it, scan it, and return it. We would reserve the rights to reproduce those photos and use them on the website, conferences, exhibit or publications.

The students may conduct the interviews at a location of your choice, or you may meet them at the University of Baltimore Langsdale Library for your interviews. During the interviews, your recollections will be recorded in two forms: audio and video. The students will be responsible for operating the equipment. You can expect the interviews to last for a minimum of 30 minutes each.

Sometimes talking about events that occurred decades ago will unearth forgotten memories. Undoubtedly, some of those remembrances will be negative. We greatly appreciate your willingness to take the risk of exploring a potentially painful past so that your life experiences will be recorded.

After the interviews the students will transcribe your oral history. They will provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review before the transcription is published. The transcription, video and audio records will be archived in the Langsdale Library Special Collections and will be accessible to the public. Your name will be attached to these documents. The University of Baltimore may use your image and/or your words in any future documentaries, exhibits, conferences or publications. Participants in the oral history project agree to waive their confidentiality.

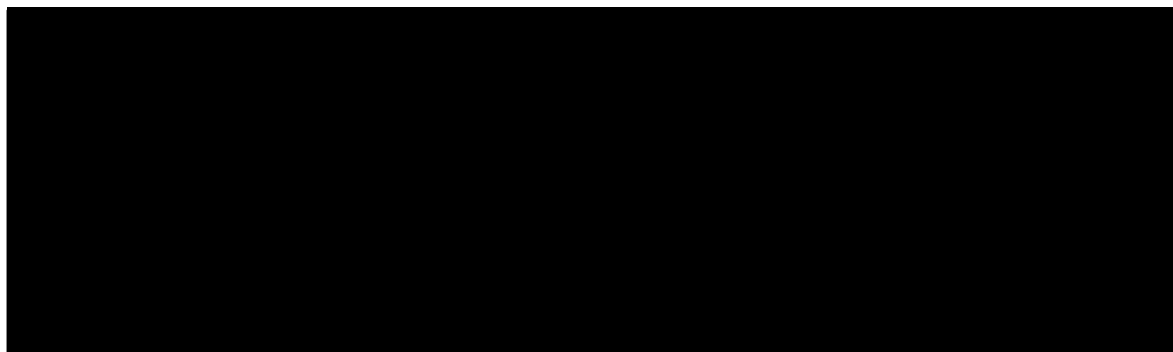
If at any time you are uncomfortable with participation in the study, you are free to drop out. Participation is strictly voluntary. While your participation is requested and highly valued, you are free to decide whether or not to continue participation at all times. You may decline to have your name published with your reminiscences

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at 410-837-5296. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Nix, Ph.D.
Visiting Assistant Professor
History and Community Studies
The University of Baltimore

I have read and understand the information provided above, and consent to participate in the study. I have also been given a copy of the informed consent for my records.



Interview with John J. Darlington Jr.

Nyasha: Ok, can you state your full name for me

John: John Joseph Darlington Jr.

Nyasha: Ok. And in 1968 how old were you if you don't mind us asking

John: I was 28.

Nyasha: and what was your situation, where were you working, living...

John: I was living in Baltimore County. I was at that time, still am, an insurance broker for a commercial insurance agency and I was also a member of the Maryland National Guard at that time

Maria: Now where in Baltimore were you living, I mean where in Baltimore County rather

John: Rogers Forge

Nyasha: And do you remember where you shopped at that time, groceries, clothes...

John: There's a place right near Rogers Forge on York Road, I don't know the name of the shopping center but there was a Giant food store and across the street was a store called Stuart's which no longer exists. There was two kind of opposite strip malls, or what I call strip mall shopping centers, there wasn't any closed mall it was a strip mall. And they had all kind of things, grocery stores, restaurants. John Leonidas' Golden Arm was there

Nyasha: And do you remember before the riots, what kinds of interactions you had with people of other races?

John: Oh heck, when I was in the army I had a lot of interactions. I was in the regular army for 3 years, in the active reserve for 2, stationed in North, South Carolina and Fort Benning, Georgia, had a lot of interaction with people of many ethnic backgrounds and had people at work that I dealt with. So I had quite a lot of exposure

Nyasha: Would you say they were social relationships as well

John: In some cases, yeah, some people who worked in the insurance business, we'd get together and have drinks after work or somebody threw a party or something like that, sure. I had people in my platoon as a, in the National Guard that were of different races

Nyasha: And how would you describe the racial mood in Baltimore before the riots?

John: I thought it was pretty much like it was in Cambridge. I lived a couple of years in Cambridge, Maryland and I didn't think it was necessarily a tense atmosphere. It was much more segregated; a lot less interaction. Groups of people would live in certain neighborhoods and you know that's where they would be and there wouldn't be any interaction between the two neighborhoods, and that goes across racial lines, and religious lines and ethnic lines, so I mean Baltimore was, it was made up as it became a major city, it grew as a result of its immigrants and its various groups of individuals and I think they had a tendency to gravitate to certain areas where they were among their friends and relatives and I don't think that, I didn't believe that there was a lot of any kind of animosity between the groups, at least it certainly wasn't on the surface. It may have been underneath the surface but having not lived in Baltimore city for I guess about 4 years prior to that you certainly lose an awareness of that kind of thing

Maria: I'm sorry did you grow up in Baltimore city?

John: Oh yeah, I was born here.

Maria: And like where did you go to high school?

John: I went first year I went to City College, second year I went to Cambridge high school in Cambridge, Maryland and the last two years I went to St. Paul's

Maria: Oh ok. What area of the city did you grow up in?

John: My father was a sea captain and we, one time when I was very young, when I was in my 7, 6 and 7, we lived in New York, just for a very brief time because his port, his main port of call was New York city, and soon after we moved up there, it was changed back to Baltimore, so we moved right back to Baltimore and we were only in New York for about, I guess about a year and a half. And I lived in, mostly on University Parkway, Roland Park in University Parkway near Hamden so and so forth, until I joined the army after high school.

Nyasha: And what do you remember about the assassination of Martin Luther King?

John: I don't know a lot of the detail, except what now you see on the history channel. At the time we certainly heard about it and that was a great, anyone who gets killed in public like that, it was much more of a shock to a person back then than it seems to be now. I think we're all so used to people being shot on the street and what not so we're sort of immune to that. But back then we had, we had the assassination of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King and it was just, everybody sort of wondered what was bringing this all about and naturally since it happened in a Southern state, we thought well it was part of the Klan or you know some group like that and we didn't, we thought it was terrible, we didn't really think it was...I'm speaking personally now, really think it was any kind of a plot, it was you know, it was just some guy just decided he was gonna shoot Martin Luther King and that's basically what we thought about it at least at the time.

Nyasha: And after, I guess shortly after that, how did you hear about the riots starting?

John: It's interesting, I was thinking about that coming down. At the time the mayor of Baltimore city was Tommy D'Alessandro Jr., his father had been mayor for years. I was attending on the Saturday I believe it started; I was attending a company function, being in the insurance business we give a couple of outings for clients and other people so Saturday was the day we picked and we were out, way out in the county. Didn't know a thing about what's going on. As I drove home, I got home about, I guess about in the neighborhood of 5 o'clock, 5.30, something like that. My wife and I were sitting down to dinner and I got a phone call and it was from our company first sergeant and he said for me to get hold of all the men from my platoon and have them report in their military uniforms to the 5th regiment armory as soon as they can get there. So, we didn't know what was going on. You turn the radio on, there was nothing going on. Come to find out later that that was done as a result of an order from the mayor that he wanted to keep this out of the public venue

Maria: There was nothing on the radio as a result of the order...

John: Not a thing, I listened to WBAL coming on down, and that's the major station here in Baltimore, there was nothing, and then as I was going down the Jones Fall Expressway, getting closer to the city, I could see in the distance flames and smoke and everything and something's happened you know. Didn't know what, but something's happened. So we all got down to the 5th regiment armory and we were told what happened, that a riot had broke out in certain sections of Baltimore city and that we were called by the governor to help quell it. And that's how I found out about it. It was not until I really got to the armory did I know anything about it. In fact when I called the men

on my platoon, nobody seemed to know anything about anything, they wanted to know why they were being called up. I said I don't know, I just have orders to do it so get down there and that's when we found out.

Nyasha: So when you heard about Dr. King's death, had you foreseen anything like this happening

John: No, not at all. And it's because I didn't think there was a, and I still don't. I have certain feelings about what sparked this whole thing but I never thought that there was a tension in the city that I could perceive that would lead to this. I just didn't. Usually there are signs, I don't believe crime is, certainly was as rampant as it is now, so there was to me, there was less tension in the city than there is now. I mean downtown at night now, I wouldn't walk around without somebody with me, but back then, wouldn't think, wouldn't be a problem. I never felt threatened and because I didn't feel threatened I didn't believe there was anything that would've sparked this kind of outpour.

Maria: Did you happen to hear at all about the riots in other cities or you were completely...

John: Well yeah, but then those riots I think the first one that broke out was New Jersey, Newark I think. I didn't associate Newark with Baltimore. I mean to me, and I've been to Newark, Newark is not a Baltimore city, Newark at that time had been know for racial problems before, in fact New Jersey has always had a reputation of having those kinds of problems, so I guess I probably didn't feel anything other than that's a Newark problem.

Maria: But how did you hear about the riots in Newark, was it before you were called up?

John: Yeah I think they were, it was right around the same time. I don't believe that there was, I know there wasn't any kind of blackout like there was here in Baltimore...you know I was 28 years old, family support, didn't have a lot of money, was in the National Guard, you know, what do you think about when you're that age. I'd already spent years in the army, I guess you get sort of almost a callousness when it comes to those kinds of outbreaks, so you know I guess I just didn't feel that it was a threatening thing to us. That's why it was such shock when it broke out.

Maria: Just to clarify, you were married at the time...

John: Yes

Maria: ...and had children also?

John: One, a son, yes.

Maria: A son, okay.

Nyasha: So you got called up to get your platoon together and after that, like where were you getting information from as far as the riots?

John: Well we all reported to the 5th regiment armory; that was the place where we drilled, as a National Guard unit we were assigned there and naturally, when you see 800 people in military uniform show up at the same time not knowing what's going on, rumors are rampant. But we'd all, pretty much all seen what was going on, and guys who were traveling from the East to the armory, knew what was going on because they drove through some of those areas that were being rioted in, okay. Me, coming from the North, all I could see was the fire in the back, I couldn't, I had no idea what was going on. So that's where the rumors start pouring around, so I think the first that that happened was they had a formation of the entire unit, all 800 men in the battalion and there was a

general information packet given out by the military saying what was going on, and this is what our mission was gonna be, and we were called by the governor, and right now we're National Guard troops, we had not been federalized, and that was an important thing because there's a difference between being a guardsmen and being federalized by the U.S. government as far as your liability is concerned, your personal liability is concerned

Maria: What is the difference?

John: Well, when you are a National Guardsmen, your liability as far as your actions are subject to individual persecution or prosecution I should say. When you're federalized, when the federal government authorizes your call up, you're part of the national army and then there is not necessarily an individual responsibility but a unit wide responsibility. You can be held responsible for your actions but it's not a personal liability situation like it would when you're in the guard. Now that may have changed but I'm not, I don't think so.

Maria: And in this situation you were not federalized

John: At the first day, we were not. We weren't federalized until the second day

Maria: And then what happened?

John: Ok, well the first thing we did after we were called into the armory and we had the briefing, my platoon was a reconnaissance platoon we were mobile, we had a means of getting around in vehicles, we had vehicles assigned to us. So our job was to patrol the various riot sites. There had already been a curfew enforced by the police, if I remember correctly, I don't know whether it was the first day but the curfew ended up being at 4 o'clock in the afternoon where no one without authorization would be allowed on the

street. We were advised to enforce that rigidly no matter who it was, white, black, doesn't matter, if you're on the street after 4 o'clock and you don't have a written pass, we're gonna arrest you and that was the way it was enforced. But that night, that first Saturday night, we were getting in our, we got in our vehicles and we patrolled Gay St, North Ave, all through the little neighborhoods off of York Rd, all through that entire riot area and everything was very quiet. The riots in that area kind of subsided, I guess because of the curfew and so we didn't see a lot of people, but we saw a lot of stores that were destroyed and in fact the weirdest thing in the whole thing, reminded me of the science fiction movie, you know where you see some of these science fiction movies, you see a city street and there's nobody on it. You see the wind blowing papers and, it was just like that, it was just like that. And the only thing you could hear, cause there weren't any cars on the street, the curfew wouldn't permit that, the buses had stopped, nobody physically was on the street. So the only thing you could hear was these various little stores had alarms systems, and the alarm gongs were going off, so you heard almost a melody of alarms throughout this entire neighborhood and it was really weird, really eerie. And we spent about 4 or 5 hours that night patrolling, called back in, they sent in another unit, we tried to catch some sleep on the armory floor. The next morning we went out Sunday and we were with I think it might have been a company of 175th, we patrolled straight up Gay St. and at that time there were a lot of people out looting and we caught a lot of them and turned them over to the police. We were in riot formation, weapons were not loaded but we had ammunition in our pocket, bayonets were fixed and we'd just go down one street after another in a line formation and just push people, herd 'em in to the areas where police would pick them up.

Maria: Did you arrest anybody on that first night?

John: No, we didn't see anyone

Maria: Nobody

John: I don't think we saw a person except policemen, and we saw a couple of people who worked for alarm companies like ADT, they had to respond and they had a pass from police. But other than that we saw no one. And the places where we going, we were going down allies, so where we were you wouldn't see a lot of people walking around anyway, but it was just, everything was just a mess, there was just nothing but, there was destruction everywhere. Goods from the stores were thrown in the street, trash cans overturned, I mean you name it, it was there.

Maria: You remember the next day, can you estimate maybe how many people that you caught?

John: Well I imagine maybe about 20, but there were other units like ours in other sections that were doing the same thing, so what the overall total was I couldn't answer that, I just don't know. And we did that I do remember that morning was very cold, we did that for, I think until midday, 1 o'clock, something like that and then they brought us back to the armory as soon as they put somebody else, another unit to replace us there. Got something to eat and then that night we did a patrol in the North Ave, Hartford Rd area, was it Hartford Rd, I think it was, where the old Arrow brewery company used to be and all the streets would go like this. It was part of old Baltimore and those of us who grew up in Baltimore knew that Baltimore was never built square it was built with streets going like this [hand gestures], it was like a maze. And so there were a lot of car dealerships on North Ave, we went, we cleared up some bars, we caught a couple of

people in there trying to steal liquor, then marched down, marched west on North Ave and checked out to be sure that the car dealers were had not been vandalized but they had been. Some of the cars had been vandalized; a big plate glass window had been broken. We did that for a few hours and then went back, called us back into the armory, and we spent the night there

Nyasha: So I'm assuming many of the people that you saw looting and in the riots were predominantly African-American?

John: Yeah, I would say, about 75/80%, yeah

Nyasha: And others were?

John: Just out for mischief. That's all they were, they were just out for mischief. I kind of was thinking about this coming down you know, now, no one needs an excuse to have a riot. I mean team wins the NBA championship, so what happens, they have a riot. They turn cars over; they set 'em on fire, I mean what's that all about. That I don't understand, I don't understand what drives people to do those kinds of things. I was brought up never to destroy anyone else's property, it just would never happen, never would cross my mind. And how people can get caught up in this and just think they're gonna take whatever their feelings might be out on someone else's property, to me that makes no sense, and I still feel that way today. I don't understand, I still don't believe there was any excuse for riots in Baltimore city or any other city because Martin Luther King was killed, I think that was basically just a convenient excuse to raise hell.

Nyasha: So how do you think the presence of the National Guard was accepted, I guess?

John: Accepted?

Nyasha: Well, perceived?

Maria: How did people take your presence? How did people perceive or how did they take the fact that you were...

John: They were afraid of us. Although the press didn't do us any favor by telling everyone that we weren't armed, which was not true. We carried, our basic weapon was an M-1, carries 8 round clip, and we had the clip hooked right here on our coat, on our jacket so you could see it.

Maria: So the press at the time propagated the information that you weren't armed, were not armed?

John: That went around, yeah. That's because in some other states in other areas, they weren't armed. I mean one of the problems they had over in Washington, was because none of the National Guard soldiers were armed there and looting was just rampant. Same thing happened in some parts of Detroit, but the commanding general of the Guard insisted we be armed, we didn't have any weapons, we didn't have any bullets chambered in the weapon, the weapon itself was unloaded but we could've easily put it in there very quickly if we were in any danger. If we ran into a problem that required force of arms, we'd call the police. That's, those were our instructions, call the police. In fact it was only one round fired in the riots fired by a National Guardsmen that was fired by accident. No National Guardsmen killed any rioter, if they were shot it was done by the police and other cities can't make that statement. There were people killed in Washington, there were people killed in Newark, there were people killed in Detroit by Guardsmen, they were not in this state; and we're very proud of that. We were able to control the situation without killing anybody.

Maria: But you definitely sensed fear?

John: I tell you why, of course we're all young guys, I in fact was one of the oldest. Most of the guys in the National Guards, were cause Vietnam was cooking up now, guys were in the guard to stay out of the draft. We though the more we could intimidate the rioters, the less rioting there would be. If they thought that they could push us and cause us to withdraw then that would only embolden them to do more things. So one thing, the first thing we did, we took all our bayonets, and we took steel wool and we took all the bluing off the bayonet. The bluing is to keep the bayonet from rusting, ok, we took it all off. So when the sunlight, it shined and that blade, which is that big [gestures], in the sunlight it looked like it was that big [gestures] and that scared a lot of people. They weren't afraid of guns, you know it's the amazing thing, they weren't afraid of weapons, bullets, but they were scared to death, scared like hell of a bayonet and that's what we used in our riot formations. We used various riot formations in which the weapon was brought down to waist level, and we just marched that way. And it was just like a phalanx of bayonets and that moved everybody out, they just all moved back and that's how we controlled the situation. We didn't have to shoot, we didn't have to do any of that, we didn't have to beat up anybody, and that's the way we controlled it. And I'm very proud, I think, I'm very proud of the way we handled it.

Maria: When did you finally get to go home?

John: 10 days after we were called up

Maria: 10 days?

John: yeah, the bad thing about it was, and I take my hat off to a lot of guys in the Guard...when we were called up, we were never told there was a riot. When they called me up I wasn't told to be sure the guys brought clean underwear, shaving gear, all that

cold weather gear. We thought it was a drill, we thought it was like a, you know, emergency practice. So it was 3 or 4 days before we got any of that, they finally allowed our wives or whoever it might be to come down to the armory and give us fresh clothes and things like that. I mean we felt like bums there for like 3 or 4 days, and then after things kind of settled down, the regular army shows up, I mean after we've *crevelled* the riot, then the army, I think it was the 82nd airborne, shows up. I think we could, from one of the roadblocks that we manned that week, we could see these refrigerator trucks driving up Eutaw Street, they all belonged to the 82nd airborne, they put those guys out in the, what's the name of the park in the city, can't remember in the middle of the city, I forget. Wyman Park is it?

Maria: Oh, Druid Hill Park?

John: Druid Hill, right, that's where they camped. That's all they did, just sit out there in their tents and shine their boots. They didn't do squat in the riots, not a thing. We did all the heavy lifting, we did all the road blocks, we did all the riot control

Nyasha: Well why do you think they brought them to Baltimore? The riots had been over...

John: Why did they? You'd have to ask the President that because I have no idea. I think they felt that they had to enforce the National, reinforce the National Guard because in other states, in other areas they had to, they got actively involved in other states. They did not, they were involved in a few patrols, I think in the Pennsylvania Ave area but that was after, that was pretty much after the riot had stopped. The riot really lasted only about a day and a half, and then it started to peer out. By then you know, the guard was up, we had the situation under control

Maria: But you had to stay there for the next week or so?

John: Oh yeah, yeah. We did a variety of jobs, most of which were road blocks; we would set up road blocks to keep traffic, keep people from coming into the city to cause mischief. There were rumors rampant, whether or not they were accurate or not that people were coming from other parts of the state, from other states to come in to create more riot atmosphere, so the only way to do that was to road block the main arteries into the city. And we manned one of the main arteries, was Eutaw and Baltimore St, and so we saw a lot of traffic and of course you didn't get past us unless you had a signed pass by the agent general. And we turned a lot of people back, and this is the first time I guess I really got angry. A couple of people really gave us a lot of back talk, we were there, we didn't wanna be there, we were cold, we were hungry and they said get out our way, I have to go pick my wife up at Baltimore Gas and Electric company, yada yada yada, didn't have a pass, didn't even know where Baltimore Gas Electric company was, so we had him arrested. The cops put him in the back of a paddy wagon until his wife had to come out to the road block to get him. I mean, people like that just make the situation worse, I mean no one wants to be there, no one wants to confront anybody, we wanted to cool this whole thing. I wanted to get back to my job you know; I wanted clean clothes, things like that. And there were some agitators, a minority, no getting around it, a minority, that wanted to continue to keep things stirred up and they're the ones we came down the hardest on. The people in the area, black and white, made no difference, a lot of those small store owners were afraid to close because they thought if they'd come back the next day their store would be burned out. A lot of restaurants too and so the only hot meals we really got were from these guys. These restaurants would stay open all night

and bring us hot sandwiches and coffee and things like that, free, I mean just, we were protecting their property and they were giving us stuff and that was great. There was a real camaraderie between the civilians and the Guard and again it was across racial lines, I never thought it was a black/white situation, that's why I couldn't understand what had happened.

Nyasha: And did you get to watch any news reports or TV coverage at all?

John: Yeah, yeah. They did send a crew, I think it was WJZ, channel 20...whatever it was channel 13 then I guess, into the armory after everything was over pretty much and after the regular army showed up. I guess it probably was 5 days after we were called up so that would have made it Wednesday, and when the regular army showed up then, the news reporters showed with their television cameras and all that stuff. Of course the regular army got all the press time. They were the ones that were interviewed, they didn't know what was going on, yet we, poor guys were dead tired. They didn't even bother to ask us anything...

Maria: When you got back home, what was the mood like in your neighborhood, how did your wife feel about the whole situation and your neighbors?

John: Well she was scared to death. Once everyone found out what was happening, and that was the day after I left, they were all scared to death. They really, they didn't know what was gonna happen. Some of the reports out of the other cities were very bad. I mean Newark, Newark was probably one of the worst of all the cities, Newark and then Washington and people were badly hurt, shot, whatever. So naturally your imagination kind of runs rampant and you think the worst is gonna happen. Luckily, we, I don't know whether we, I don't think we were authorized to do it anyway, when we were on patrol

duty, we'd go by a pay phone and call home and say I'm ok, don't worry about it, everything's fine, yada yada. And I think that helped a great deal. I wasn't aware that there was any kind of backlash or any kind of strange feeling in the neighborhood it just didn't you know. Of course people at work asked me tons of questions, what was going on and so and so forth. It was more of a curiosity than anything else. Most of the people that I had come in contact with didn't even know the parts of the city we were in, they knew where Gay St was, they knew where North Ave but I mean they didn't walk through there. And that goes back to the point I was making where people sort of lived in their enclaves and didn't go to other areas. So out of more of a curiosity, that was about it. In a week or so, of course the newspapers kept everything enflamed, and I really, I blamed the severity of the riots on 2 things. The newspapers, at that time was the Baltimore Sun and the News American, and the mayor, because they kept this issue inflamed and it was a feeling that maybe the riots would break out again. They never did thank goodness, they kept trying to divide people and I have no sympathy for people like that.

Nyasha: How did they keep trying to divide?

John: Well, they kept saying the whites against blacks, I mean you know, you read the papers today, it's the same thing now. My heritage is French and English but I don't call myself a French-American or and English-American, I call myself American, but you know, what do the newspapers call people of a colored race, the black race. African-Americans...we can't be an African-American because Africa is a country and America is a country, it's either one or the other. You wanna be a black American, I can be a white American, but if I call myself a white American, I'm considered insensitive. So you

know it's, this is the kind of divide that people try to make this racial issue. I don't think its racial, I think most people, black and white, can get along real well, I think they do get along real well, particularly when they work together. But there are some fringe players out there, we know who they are, who promote this division because it promotes them. It makes them important so this is what they try to do, I'm up to here with it now. The newspapers are a major reason why we have a racial problem in this country, because it sells newspapers. Couldn't care less what it does to the country, it sells newspapers.

Nyasha: Do you remember what type of violence was occurring during the riots, when you were on the streets?

John: Mostly just destruction of personal property, they'd throw fire bombs in the neighborhood grocery stores and burn them out, steal drugs out of pharmacy safes, I didn't see, I didn't hear or see anything having to do with physical injuries for the most part. I mean yeah there was a little bit of that, I didn't get the impression that there was any, this was primarily a property destruction riot as opposed to a injury or killing riot

Nyasha: Did you have any friends or family who owned businesses?

John: No I didn't.

Nyasha: So how did your life and activities change after the riots?

John: I can't say that they did at all. The only thing was since we'd done such a good job in the Baltimore city riots, our unit was the company that trained all the other National Guard units in the state on riot control. We went all over the place, went to Cambridge, western Maryland, that's what we did because after the riots, just about every time we had a holiday, we were, we got called up and put in the armory for the day as a protection against the riots. And that really rubbed, that really rubbed thin after a while, it really did.

First of all, what did it say? What did it say to the community at large? It said they can't be trusted and they have to have the army and the National Guard in the armory ready to break up a riot. To me that promotes that kind of feeling, that's what I was trying to say

Maria: Everyday holiday or like federal holidays?

John: Yeah, Easter, I spent three Easters in the 5th regiment armory, because we were called up for riot duty, the four anniversaries of Martin Luther King's assassination, riot duty. I mean it was really bad, and we never had anything else, it never broke out; I mean the next thing that broke out was Cambridge. But in Baltimore, it was pretty much it, but we spent a lot of our free time sitting in an armory, cleaning our rifles because there was a possibility there'd be a riot. You know after a while it got very thin, it rubbed the wrong way and it made people angry, it really did.

Nyasha: People as far as community or?

John: Well I mean, think of it for a minute. If every time there's a holiday, instead of being with your family you're down at the 5th regiment armory how would you feel after a while? I mean I'd come home after a long day, a hard day's work and I'd get a phone call saying get your platoon down there, we're on duty this weekend. I mean after a while, you got to be angry, I mean its human nature.

Maria: Was the city at large aware that they were calling up the National Guard every time?

John: That was the Governor doing that

Maria: Oh wow, so it was all over the state?

John: Well yeah but it was contained in Baltimore city but the mayor has no control of the National Guard, it has to be the Governor. So to call the National Guard in, it has to be from the Governor's office.

Maria: Right, I guess what I meant is like were civilians, people in the city, were they aware that you guys were being called up every time there was a holiday

John: No, no. Cause they didn't let us out on the street, they hovelled us in the armory for a weekend. I mean its like being in jail. No they didn't want us to go out, they didn't want soldier's presence out on the street, they just wanted to keep us in the armory for the weekend. I, in fact that was the main reason I had to leave the National Guard after 9 years

Maria: Really?

John: Yeah because my boss, we were called out for Cambridge twice, we were called out for the University of Maryland twice, and I had to leave work. And after a while the boss says look, I support you being in the Guard but this gotta stop.

Maria: It was interfering.

John: So I just had to quit. Yeah.

Nyasha: And how do you think Baltimore as a city changed after the riots?

John: That's a tough question.

Nyasha: Is there anything you see like from the riots that directly affected Baltimore or...

John: I don't think the people changed. I think there was an effort to put more resources into the poor neighborhoods, initially. I think after a few years, that quarter kind of petered away. There was, I don't believe, and this is again my personal opinion, I don't

believe there was any other real threat of a riot since Martin Luther King's death, there was always something in the newspapers stirring the summer, that there was gonna, tensions were high. All that did to me was promote this atmosphere of tension. They never said that in December, it was cold, it was only during the hot months you know, again I think that was all promoted by certain elements that saw it was to their advantage to promote that kind of thing. I don't believe that the black community or the white community, or either, was in that kind of mood, not that I saw. We had a lot of kind of guys, the black soldiers in my platoon and we talked about it and there kind of as ticked off about everything as we were. I mean when you get to talk to people one-on-one, you find out that they have the same problems that you've got and all of the sudden the black/white thing goes away, as far as I'm concerned it does. And that why till this day, I'm a firm believer that the government, the people that ran the city, and the media were the prime reasons why that riot got to bad.

Nyasha: Do you remember what businesses were affected?

John: Mostly retail stores, mom and pop shops, things like that, a lot of grocery stores in the poor communities, where it seemed like there was a grocery store almost every other block, shoe stores, furniture, laundries, a lot of laundry shops were looted. People stole clothes. That's primarily what it was, I mean there were some, there was an incident I think this was either the Monday or the Tuesday following the outbreak of the riots, we were assigned to an area where Johns Hopkins Hospital was and on Broadway, which is the street that runs right in front of the old building, right across from the main building was a multi-storey brick and steel building that was a dormitory for the nurses going through the nursing program at Hopkins, students, and they asked us to take the building

over because they were afraid there was snow, there was only one way getting out of that building, and they were afraid that if something broke out, they would be trapped in that building. So we ended up putting a unit, a group of people up on the roof as an observation post, we secured that building so that people could be protected and I mean, that group was across ethnic and racial lines.

Maria: The nurses you mean?

John: Yeah, I mean they were all afraid. They were really afraid because they were on the, on kind the peripheral area of the where the riots, the worst part of the riots, so they didn't know if somebody would come rape them, or beat them or kill them, or burn the building or all kinds of things, run through your mind. So when we got there, they were really happy for us to be there, we stayed in that building for 24 hours up on the roof.

Nyasha: And did your interactions with people of other races change at all?

John: I can only speak for myself.

Maria: That's all we're interested in right now.

John: I never had, I never grew up in an atmosphere where one race played against the other. And when I went into the regular army, you couldn't have an attitude like that, I mean it just wasn't gonna be tolerated and I guess I lived when I was growing up, I lived kind of a sheltered life. I didn't have a lot of interaction with black people. At that time the schools were not fully integrated, when I was at City College in 1956, that was the 2nd or 3rd year that school was integrated, but there weren't a lot of black children that went there but while I was in the elementary grades, absolutely no, no integration in schools. So I guess you could say I lived kind of a sheltered, sheltered life, but when I got in the service, I got to understand people for what they were, and there were good white people

and bad white people; good black people and bad black people, and good Chinese people and bad Chinese people. I mean we had to, you started learning that you had to take people for what they are, as individuals, not what someone perceives them to be. I mean, and that's just the way I evolved so when I was called up for this riot duty I didn't, I looked upon it as law breakers, I didn't look upon it as black people. I mean they perpetrated things against these rioters, against their own people, I mean they destroyed their own neighborhoods, that's insanity. If they had a big group of them, marching to Roland Park, basically a white neighborhood and burned it down, that's a black/white issue but they were destroying most of their own property and the poor black people who didn't have a whole lot of money to begin with were even more impoverished because of these trouble makers. To this day, I still think that the assassination was only an excuse and it's reinforced by what people do now, when they win the national championship, or when something else happens, at a time when you're supposed to be happy and they riot. What's this all about? There's a certain element of society that we use any excuse to destroy and to injure and I don't think it has anything to do with the ethnic background of a person, the racial background of a person. I think there are bad people out there and that's how I always looked at 'em when I was in the Guard, they were law breakers.

Nyasha: So is there anything else about the riots that you really just started to remember, something that stuck out, especially you being a National Guardsmen

John: Yeah, it's to say that one thing I was proud of, we didn't have to shoot anybody, I think the communities that we were exposed to in our duties became much closer as a result of the riots.

Nyasha: And which ones were those? Which communities?

John: That we patrolled, ok, that we had an exposure to. A lot of these were in the riot areas, local business, they came to our aid, there was a mutual satisfaction between the guards and the guard and the local merchants, talked to a lot of black men, a lot of black women when we were manning some of these checkpoints and they were just as distraught about this thing as anybody. I mean they cried, because what little they had put together in their lives, and their lives were getting better was then suddenly destroyed by these people. And you know, we were told very much to keep our personal opinions out of anything, so when we talked to these people we didn't egg 'em on to say anything. We let 'em vent and they vented. I think Baltimore lost a lot of its innocence as a result of the riots, I think as a result of the riots Baltimore became much more tension filled. I think as a result of the riots, because of that tension, that I think has contributed to some degree to the drug culture we have in the inner city, I think it's divided more people than it's brought together. I know, I don't think I've ever had a conversation about the riots for 20 years until today, nobody ever talks about it. After the initial shock went away, I think people went about their own lives again, tried to piece their lives back together if they were injured or destroyed. I know that a lot of the business people who were burned out or destroyed in these neighborhoods never went back and that hurt the black community because the merchants, they weren't being replaced by anybody. Grocery stores and pharmacies didn't wanna open up in the black community because they were afraid of future riots, I think they hurt themselves. I think the black citizens who participated in the riots, hurt their fellow citizens by what they did and I think it still carries over to some degree today although it's hard to judge that based upon the drug culture, you know. You don't know what problems the inner city have their origins in the riots or are they apart of

the new drug culture problem, you know its hard to I guess...the people who live in the city would be a better judge of that than I would be. But I saw some good things that happened as a result of the riots, I saw some bad things that happened. I think we all looked at each other with a little bit more caution than we used to, like I said earlier we lost a lot of our innocence, Baltimore was a melting pot of different ethnic groups and I think there was more polarization as a result of the riots, because of that, like I said there are some good things but there are a lot of bad things too.