Interviewee Interviewee 1

Good evening, my name is Wilson Santiago, I'm the interviewer. It's October 7th of 2024, we are making interviews for Oral History. I'm here today [INAUDIBLE] commercial. Can you tell me your name?

Since you mentioned the fight, could you talked to us a little more about the history of the fight and what that was about?

What happens here is, that a lot of people talk about the fight from 1999, and the fight when the bomb stroke, the one that killed the security guard David Sanes, but I will tell you, the fight started in 1941 when the Navy came to expropriate the land. The Navy arrived here in 1941, and told the people that they needed the land to defend the world from Hitler's regime, back then, that was, and they gave people certain time to get out, and I am going to give you, 20, 30 dollars for your land, your house and your land, and if you take it you leave, and if you don't take it you also leave. Those were the options that they gave them. They transported them on buses without handrails, all together with the people, the head of the household, the wife, the children, together with goats, pigs, and the cattle in the same bus. And the Navy made some alleys, if you go to the Montesanto neighborhood, in Vieques, you are going to notice that there are some roads that run from north to south, they go up and down the hill, and it was the Navy, they made alleys within the sugarcane crops, as we call them, the land that had sugarcane, at that time sugarcane was being grown practically all over; and they were dropping off people, one next to another with a space in between, simply at the alley that they made, without any kind of housing, where to stay, nothing. We even remember a partner in the fight, he already died, Pablo Hernandez, a Korean War veteran, he said that he would never forget the day that they were expropriated, his mom gave birth to his brother Manuel laying on a cane bale like a pig, and he said, that is why I never will support what the Navy did, and he was a veteran. And he said, my dad put up a little shelter with two sticks to cover her a little from the dew and the rain at night. At that moment, people were not very educated, the majority of our people wrote, signed with a cross, I remember that my grandfather came to Vieques, from Ceiba, he came to Vieques at the beginning of the century, in the 1900's, looking for a job, because in Vieques the economy was blooming, they said that in Vieques there were oxen with coral, the one that has coral is the female, not the male, but like if it was a parable, they said that there were male oxen with coral. The economy was booming, they not only came from Isla Grande, people also came from the Virgin Islands looking for jobs here. That is why people from Vieques are different from Puerto Rican people, over there was a mix of Indian, African and Spaniard, and in Vieques there is a mix of Indian, African, English, Danish, Portuguese, and French too, even the first governor that Vieques had was French.

So there was a time that-

With the Spanish Monarchy permit, Vieques even was- When Columbus passed Vieques it was in 1492, he stopped in Vieques, Puerto Rico, to 1493. Even Columbus named Vieques, Graciosa, because it looked similar to an island in the Canary Islands. He thought it looked similar to that island and that is why he gave it that name, although Spain was never too interested in the Vieques development, remember that they were looking for wealth; a small island, and what they did was that they mainly stayed in Isla Grande because they found gold there, a bigger island, and it was until, everybody wanted Puerto Rico, nevertheless, Vieques was the only place, the last place, when you come from South America from Colombia, you are turning around- The problem then is that you are coming up against the wind to go back to the Old World, but it was practically the last place that you could stop by to get supplies, because there were x amount of water streams that didn't run dry all year long, and that the island was so abundant in produce, that they could load a ship before a trip that could last three, three months and a half to arrive there. They had fresh water, that is why they started to stop by here, and at a moment they started to like Vieques, the French called it Crab Island, because there were a lot of oxen, and what happens? The moment comes that they realize that Vieques has trees so enormous, and the wood is so good, that they start to come to Vieques to find wood to build ships, then, when Spain realizes, they say wait up, what is going on in Vieques? They send a garrison that what they usually did every ten, five, ten years, they sent a group, when they saw that there was a settlement, they sent a garrison of soldiers, and at rifle point they got them out, you have to go, this is ours. When they started to notice that they were cutting wood and taking wood away, they sent an individual, a general, a tenant, I don't remember the rank, to charge for cutting wood in our island. The thing was that, it was but after, we could say that El Fortin, after so many centuries, from 1492 until the beginning of 1800's that they started to build, El Fortin, how many centuries had passed already, but when they saw that they could make money, and then they decided to give a chance to the French named Teodoro Le Guillou Le Guillen[ph], that with the monarchy license, he developed a sugar mill, to grow sugarcane, small fruits and so on. Going back to the subject of the fight and the Navy, from 1941 on, there were several episodes; people that refused to leave the place, they got a bulldozer in and they took the house down.

How old were you when that happened?

Boy, in 1941 my dad was 8 years old, when they expropriated it.

Those are stories.

Stories that they told us. The idea is that if they didn't pass it down to their children, it will be lost. My dad remembered, that at that time when they went down, almost arriving to the house, one of the calves that they had, a little one, that was tied up, it fell of the bus, because it didn't have rails, and the bus kept dragging it, so one of his older brothers, put his hand in his pocket, got a curved knife and tries to cut it off, but it got stuck in the pocket, he bent down, put it under the rope, pulled it and cut off the calf, that kept rolling. It took us time taking care of her, but people protested but when you protested what they said was, if you have a complaint, go to the federal court and you can complaint there. When they talked about the federal ones to people, nowadays, at this moment, they talk about the federal ones, and people yes, it all ends there, when they talked about the federal ones. Then the episode of the 1960 decade came, in 1963 there was a Secretary of Defense whose last name was McNamara, that wanted to expropriate the land completely, because they at the beginning expropriated the West, 8,000 acres, and they expropriated 18,000 East, in total, the 79% percent of the island land, it has 33,000 acres of land, and they expropriated 26,000.

They left you a space.

In the medium.

In the medium.

And at a moment, in 1963 they wanted to get the people out of the medium, and they wanted to send them two one of two places, or Sand Cruz y Las Virgenes, or Alaska. Back then the Puerto Rico governor in 1963, that was Luis Muñoz Marin, told him, there re letters, you can get them, there are letters of the communication between Luis Muñoz Marin and McNamara that was the Secretary of Defense, where Muñoz Marin tells him, since you are a democratic country, then there should be an opportunity for the people from Vieques voted, in a referendum, to get out of Vieques. I see it very difficult that the people from Vieques vote for that. I will, he said, Muñoz Marin, he said, I will do all the possible to convince them to vote to leave, if I convince them to vote to leave, at least you have to allow the people from Vieques to come back once a year to Vieques, because they accustom to honor their dead, in the case of Vieques, they are going to light candles to their dead on November 1st.

That is a tradition, a culture, that the people from Vieques do.

The island does it too, nut they do it the 2nd. And there is a reason why they did in Vieques the 1st. They did in the 1st is Vieques, because the priest that officiated the mass in Vieques, was the same one that did in in Fajardo, and what he did was, he came one day before to Vieques to have the day of the dead mass, and the official day he did it in Fajardo, which it was the 2nd, therefor, in Vieques it was the 1st, and that it was a whole event, where you noticed a lot of noise, people moving. I remember having gone to paint graves with my dad when I was a child, and cleaned the graves, picking up weed, to make balls of weed; there was aa market in front of the cemetery. There were light wreaths all over the cemetery, and all that was lit up, it was an event.

One question, that cultural tradition that you, the people from Vieques have, is there a connection with fishing? I know that you- How old are you?

I'm currently 63.

73.

63.

You can take it.

My god, I don't doubt-

I'm going to stop the recording.

Interviewee Interviewee 2

To solve it. The matter was that McNamara tells him- Are you recording it already?

Yes, it's recording it.

The matter was that, McNamara tells Muñoz Marin, the problem is solved, when they leave they dig up the dead and take them with them, so they don't have to come back to Vieques not even for that, not even to visit their dead ones. This comment got to a lot of sectors of other countries, and they started to criticize them, you are a country that says to be democratic, and you are going to make that the people from Vieques dig up dead people and take them with them? That is like a Dracula plan, and it was called the Dracula plan, but that event was so influential on the community, that that day practically the town was focused on that. Those days even my dad was a man that fished, and those days he didn't go fishing, because he had to comply with painting the graves. The township stopped working at noon, and they gave the day off to the employees for them to be able to honor their dead ones, and so on. Different places gave the people hours to get out, even the fishermen were not exempt of that; fishermen are known, in the case of Vieques, the fishermen patron is our Lady of Mount Carmel, and here, when the patron saint's day came, they went to the pier with Our Lady and they walked around with her all over that area, and they thew flowers up; all that has subsided, these new generations, not even with the dead ones is the same, not even with the patron's one, nor the process of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. A lot of the fishermen carried scapularies, and they felt-

It was a cultural tradition very big. It's been lost.

Yes.

You mentioned that your dad was a fisherman, so you come from a generation of fishermen for a lot of years.

To give you an idea, mu grandfather came from Isla Grande to Vieques, rowing a boat at the beginning of the 1900's, from the Ucal [ph] de Naguabo beach, even when they were going to get out, they couldn't get out because the ship that they had, the boat, that it was small, some prisoners had stolen it, and they had left it in Punta Santiago in Humacao, they left it on the rocks, and they had to mend it with fabric because what they used to use was clay and burlap to weave the wood; but next day in the morning they left and they arrived to Vieques, but my grandfather, my uncles, my grandfather's brothers-in-law that came to Vieques looking for a job, they stayed, they all fished, from one family and the other one, one side and the other. In the case of my grandfather's children, all of them fished, mu grandfather had that.

It's a big generation.

Yes.

Your family has a lot of family, related with the decade.

Even when the expropriation came here, that the Navy expropriated, my grandmom's side, the Cintron family, that they were expropriated, they left, they didn't stay in Vieques, they didn't want to be in the sugarcane plantation, they got in their boat, they had sailboats, they didn't have motors then, and they decided to go to Naguabo, and that family was what they call the Reiles[ph], where it was Chino, Yayin[ph], today the ones that stay is Chago, those people have already died, and they left Vieques, their parents left Vieques, Yayin died just about one year, but all that line comes from the Interviewee and the Cintron family, their were fishermen.

What kind of species back then they fished, is it identical to the kind of species that they fish nowadays? And what do you think, was there more abundance before, or is there more abundance today?

That is mandatory, the question and the answer.

Yes.

The species, practically the desirable species are still almost the same, of course now there is a market more strict.

Can you mention them?

Yes, before the blue striped grunt fish, porgy fish, that it's what they call white grunt, queen trigger fish, mutton snapper fish, yellow tail snapper fish, red snapper fish, when we find a red snapper fish, schoolmaster fish, mutton snapper fish, even when all these species belong to the snapper kind at the scientific level, even the mutton snapper fish, that they call snapper, all these, even the red snapper, but today there is a more strict market that they usually want red snapper, they want tuna, they want sword fish, before it was what they very common, people loved what they called the second and the third one, they ate Bermuda chub, a kind of butterfly fish, what they call angel fish, today they put them in a fish tank, before everybody ate them.

Can you expand on the topic, and explain to me what you call the first, second and the third one fish?

First quality, is what they call the snapper, fish from shallow depths, that is the one that they call first class fish, and we are going to say that is more expensive, of course, more effort, but there you have the yellow snapper, you have the blackline fish.

Black fish.

Yes. You have the sea bream fish, that on contrary to other places, you get sea stream fish at 80, here we get them at 250, 300 feet, we catch 2 pounds and a half sea bream fish.

Big.

Big, they have a black mouth inside. Big sea stream fish. You have the queen snapper.

That is the wenchman one.

Yes, the queen snapper that looks like a red mullet.

That is the queen snapper.

Yes, after that there are the ones from less depth like the coney fish.

That is the jewfish.

No, the no jewfish is another that is caught more to the top, the coney fish is a grouper fish that their back is cream color like the coral hind, but you can catch them at 150, 180 pounds, you can catch them small, but you can catch them very big too.

Those are second class fish.

No.

Or are we talking about the first one?

This is the first one. That grouper fish, the meat is so soft and it's used a lot to make fillets. It's not too common to catch it, the day that I caught it, it took a while, but you catch one, but in the case of the red snapper, sea bream fish, the snapper, that is first class, and it's sold at a very good price. Here on the surface, it's the yellowtail snapper, hog fish, that is very difficult to sell them because of the problem of the sea water, here there's a severe problem with fish poisoning, but there you have it, I mentioned it to you, the mutton snapper, and the different snapper that I just mentioned, the yellow snapper.

The striped one.

Yes, and the yellowtail snapper has its moments, its peaks here, it's caught, and before they were caught in monumental amounts.

Is the stripped one is also included?

Yes, it's first class.

It's first class.

It's aa very good fish, what happens is that there are different kind of fishing that stress to much the species. I don't know if there is not enough resources, the same happened with the queen conch, if you could aim a digger into the depth of the sea and start to push it, you could make a mountain of queen conch at 70 feet deep, you could get out the peak of the queen conch in bunches.

That is what they call, I have heard, what they call the queen conch cemetery. Is that what you are-?

Yes, but, how can I tell you? Before we fished, you went to the bottom; I remember had gone when I was young, 14, 15 years old to dive, just with your lungs, 30 feet and we were a few of us, and we caught 200, 250 pounds, in the seagrass meadows of Thalassia, but all that has now disappeared, you look at the bottom and-

What do you think that could happened with it?

People, we are a different generation. The past generation told you that if the old one doesn't take care, the little one won't see, that is a saying that was used a lot. My dad took us when he went to catch sardines; we are six male brothers, and we all had to be around when my dad threw the fishing net and came with that fishing net, all it was to look for anything that was not sardines or shore fish, we had to get them and throw them to the water immediately so they could survive; and we caught the sardines that we needed, this is enough, we leave. This doesn't happen here, what is the problem that they had with the navy; the navy in land controlled the 79% of the land and a lot more than that at sea. One of the problems, on one hand, I want to be honest, it’s my responsibility not to tell you. At sea there are fishermen, conscientious they are the same, people, fishermen that recognize that that is their way of living and that they have to protect it so they can live from that, from that if it's a 10%, it's a lot.

You, as a fishermen, how have you experienced, how would you pass down that thought, the taking care of, to the youth nowadays?

I'm going to tell you an anecdote. We went a while ago, and I threw, I went to pick up mu fishing baskets, and one of my fishing baskets came out with two grouper fish.

That is a grouper.

Yes, it's prohibited per life. My dad caught them once he caught 400 and some pounds of only that grouper. It wasn't prohibited. When that grouper came out, I was with my son Melvin, not too young, 18, 20 years old. About 30-pound two grouper came out, and my partner, a fisherman, Prieto, don't tell me, and I started to laugh and I said, I don't have to tell you, you know it. But Prieto, we are the only ones that release them, and I said, we make the difference; my son tells me, daddy we have to release them, I said yes; he grabbed the groupers and they went flying, and after he threw them he told me, daddy, why did we have to released them, are they banned? I said, yes, Melvin, they are banned, but that was not the real reason that we released them, have you seen that grouper before, he said no, that is the first time that I see them, that kind of grouper. You got to see them alive, not in a book, now we want that your children see them alive too, that's why we released them, because we want that your children can come to the sea and one day be able to see them alive, not in a history book that say, this existed and human beings finished them.

A life lesson.

And that's how my dad taught us. Lobster with roe, what you hear, if I don't take it some hone else will take it. The problem is of the one that takes it; my grandparents, my great-grandparents fished, my dad, my brothers, all six male brothers, we all have fished and we had to depend of the sea and live from the sea. I went to college, my dad and my mom wanted me to go to college, and I went to high school, and I came and enrolled, finished and I went fishing.

You wet fishing when you finished high school and college.

Yes. I went fishing. And they called me and went to give class to the school at a certain point, and I taught biology and chemistry.

You were a teacher, as a profession.

Yes, when I started to teach, there were some kids that were worth it, and there were some groups excellent, but other ones, that they didn't study and they didn't let the other ones study. On the other hand, it was that sort of moments, when you started to work, I had a wife, with a newborn baby, and I had been five months working and I had been paid yet; and when the summer came, the December break, I told the superintendent, I'm going fishing, what pays? You make more fishing? You know what happens? When I go out, if I don't fish to sell, I fish to eat, and I have a wife, and I have a son, I need to, my wife, my son and I need to eat. I cannot keep teaching, five month later and I haven't been paid, and I would like to, and I love it, and I make time every time that a kid comes and tells me that he needs and interview, no problem, tell me when and I'll be there, and I have to go to the island, and I go to the university with him, I accompany him, I know what the kids in college go through, but it's not the moment, and it's like this at sea. In difficult moments, in the disaster moments, it's when you fish the most, fisherman profit in troubled waters.

That's correct.

So what do we do? You go to the sea, get a pair of fish, you boil them, make a soup, a little of rice or funche and 50, 60, 100 people eat, and it's food at the moment, and healthy food, but it's turning somewhere else. The navy here was bombarding, destroying the sea, and right now it's estimated that there are more than 100,000 bombs that haven't detonated in the water.

Nowadays.

Nowadays. That is the ones that haven't detonated, no counting the ones that detonated. It's estimated that between 15 and 20% of the explosive artifacts, armed bombs don't denotate. There you have a 15 to 20% of the ones that fell in didn't detonate in the water, the rest, 20% did detonate in the water. And I'm still waiting for a governmental agency to dare to tell the navy, I need you to make some aquaculture and mariculture projects and we need to repopulate the reefs and the species, because on the other hand there is misusage of resources, why? Because there is a new generation that has gone to the sea, and they see it as a place to go to look for money, it's not an interaction. I still remember the first day that I had a mask on and I look under the sea, I still remember, I came out screaming for my mom to tell her how pretty the seabed was. I remember when my dad took us for the first time on a wooden boat, called The Trompito, it was a boat kind of round with a 10 horses motor, and my mom and my siblings were there, two brothers of mine, we didn't have a bait, and my mom had a blue suit with embroidered white stripes, and my dad took those stripes and he cut them off with a knife and he tightened them to the hook and throw it out, and he caught a bill fish like this, and he kept throwing it out, and when we see, he had the boat with a lot of fish inside. And I still remember, I have it in my mind, my dad tightening the pieces, those are things that you don't forget.

You carry it.

I go to the sea, and I still hear it, and my dad's partners that also died, that they were fishing partners, Julio Pizarro, Cholo, Quique, etc. I go to the sea, I go to the places, and it gets me, I live the moments again.

Yes.

It's a thing, that's why- There are people that cannot yet understand that you studied and why you are not there, this is very different.

On the same line, do you think that there is a future fishing here in the island, in Vieques?

There has to be control, and there has to be a compromise. I'm one of the ones that think that to be able to improve this, we need a new generation of fishermen, a new generation that is educated, that don't see the sea simply as a place to look for money, but a place of interaction. My dad taught all of us that you have to respect the sea, and that even in difficult moments, where there is a bad sea, if you come out bad and you encounter a problem, it's your fault, because it was telling you and you had to interpret it, it was telling you that you wanted to go out and you went out. That is why, and excuse me, I don't know if you want to change it later, but my dad said-

What you tell me if you tell me to change it-

What I mean is the way he told us, he told us, if you see a bad sea, and you feel more handsome or with big cojones than anyone, you go out, it's more likely that you end up wetting your little testicles, and then you find a very big problem believing that you were the most handsome, and you know what is going to happen to you? That when you found the problem you don't have anyone to help you for thinking that you are handsome, and when you are swimming in the water you are going to realize that you are the only asshole that decided to go out and now you don't have anyone to help you because you are alone. Now, it's different if you went out with a good sea, because the sea was indicated you that you could go out, and being there, the sea became bad, you are going to talk to the sea and you are going to tell it, I didn't disrespect you, I'm here because you gave me the opportunity to come out, therefore, I'm going to ask you to give me the opportunity to go back, because I'm not going to stay here, and if you don't want us to give each other some slaps on the face, give me a quiet time and I leave, and you can be reassure that when you talk to it, it will give you a quiet time and it will allow you to go back.

Your dad was a wise man. If he taught you that lesson, and culture too, because it was like a tradition, a person that he knew.

Yes, and he taught the matter of the time when you cut the wood, there are still people that don't believe it. Here there is an American man that bought a 35,000 dollars lumber mill, and he brought it to Vieques, they call him Mojo, and he started to cut trees down because he wanted to make tables and so, and they started to get moth-eaten, and he told me look, and I said, you know what happens Mojo? That you have to cut the wood on waning moon, you cannot cut it on new moon, you need to wait to the week after full moon, from then you can cut the wood for the next 14 days, and it won't get moth-eaten. Really? It's not true. Not true? It's fine, don't believe it. If you don't believe it's fine, keep cutting it the way you are cutting it. If you don't listen you won't learn. I can't believe it. Fine, what happens is that it's even proved scientifically. The human body has 68 to 70, some have more percentage of water, the moon controls all the body waters, and the wood has water, fish, all here has water, so it influences all the world. All that kind of things, and knowing what tree helps with this, what tree helps for that, all that, I was always behind my dad. What plant help to gargle if you have a sore throat you have to use sage. Mabi, quitarran, they are two different things, and people believe that mabi is quitarran, but it gives you a headache, the real mabi-

The tree species.

Yes.

And some of those tree species, where they use to build fishing stuff?

Yes. I always have said that Vieques should have the Prickly ash festival.

Prickly ash is a species.

Yes. It's a tree that grows very slowly, it's very dense, super heavy, super solid, for every nail that you are going to use to build the fishing baskets you have to drill it, if you don't drill it- And you have to have a steady hand and when you hit that hammer, you have to do it firmly, because if it bends a little and you try to get it out, you can't even get it out, you have to poke it, change the position and then drill it again to be able to take it out.

That is to make fishing baskets.

To make fishing baskets. A wooden, the wire got rotten, they used galvanized wire, one year later the wire got rotten and the square was still solid, it's a wood that you cut it on waning moon, six months late it still green, it's cut.

What kind of art do you use?

Right now we are using the regular one, almost all is vinyl coated wire.

For the basket.

For the basket and boxes.

Boxes are for lobster.

Lobster. The basket catches lobster too, but baskets and boxes. What happens is that the box is cheaper because the materials now have duplicated, the cost of the steel and all the materials have gone up, but before they were built with prickled ash, the thing is that now we advance more with this kind of wire, because you needed one complete day of work for every basket; because each nail you had to drill it, then we usually build big art.

It was a real art, handicraft to make a fishing basket. Nowadays too.

Yes, with a four feet wire making fishing baskets of 24, 25 meshes, when you want here, in this space, it was a fishing basket that was this tall, that went from here to there, that you can put four people in, taking the way, enormous baskets, heavy ones, to carry them we took them out rolling them until get them up on the boat, but those were baskets that fished very well.

Very well.

Now, I have pneumatic scissors, with air with a compressor, I punch wire, before I punched that same wire by hand, and my hand swollen in such a way, but you advance to build more fishing. Fishing depends of what you build.

And the weather, the climate change, what has happened with the hurricanes, [CROSSTALK]

That has had a direct effect.

Like what?

The destruction of the reefs, and remember that our reefs where more vulnerable to be destroyed because there was a massive bombing that created so much vibration, to give you an idea, we, when there still was the bombing in Culebra, it was like the weight of the bombing was divided between Vieques and Culebra, but when the bombing stopped in Culebra, what they didn't do in Culebra, they added it to Vieques, after the amphibious landings that were landings that threw tanks into the water, and that passed above the coral reefs and it destroyed everything where it passed, and to end it up they were on the sand when they came out, that's what they did, even, there was a moment were it was visible that there was some sort of a different machine that the army was using, because if you dived in, you found on the seabed, like a bulldozer had walked down on the bottom of the sea.

Was that with the navy or with the hurricane?

With the navy. With the hurricanes, the hurricane affects too, what happens is that with the bombing problem that the vibrations of the bombing, what they didn't destroyed with all the bombs that fell into the water, the reefs that where at long distance, the vibrations run four times faster1 in the water than in the water, so it could create cracks in the reefs to a longer distance even when it wasn't the impact area, so they more vulnerable when the overflow, the hurricanes came, the storms, even the overflow of the day of the dead is normal, here we always expect the overflow of the day of the dead, close to the end of the month of October, beginning of November, an overflow comes to shore that is the violent one.

Is that what they called the swell of the dead?

Yes, the swell of the dead.

It's know at the island level.

Then, but the subject of the loss, so much construction near the shore, Vieques is one, that they haven't done anything with that, they keep building, they keep taking down, they keep destroying. There are places here that there was black mangrove, and they finished with it to build pools, there's even an area nearby that one person had a house and at the front, inside of the se they practically built a pool with blocks, and they came- I went with the people of natural resources, people from coastal zone demarcation, that they were working on it, and how many years had passed? And nothing has happened.

Yes.

I think that this is a problem that we have had because unfortunately, the changes of administration don't give continuation to the projects that they have, and some projects are very good ideas, but they are left in the air. And the other one that comes in, and if it's going to affects the dear friends, they are not going to follow up, and all that kind of things. But on one hand the hurricanes, on the other hand, the effect that the navy did for 67 years with some incredible bombings, and still what keeps happening, because right now in Vieques it's getting done a project called Cleaning project, but it's open burning, open detonation.

They are going to keep detonating anyway.

Yes, they keep detonating. All that was here in macro form they convert it to a micro form, and what is left they passed it through fire, and they took it to recycling plants, but was it going to happen with the thousands of bombs that are in the water? Because they knew that they had- I participated in several meetings, where they alleged that they had to detonated wherever they found them because they were bombs that were armed, because their detonation mechanism had failed, therefore they were unstable and a danger and they had to detonate them wherever they found them. The ones that are in the water were armed, they dropped them in and fell into the water, but then they are there, their detonation mechanism failed, they have to be unstable, and what are you going to do? Are you going to detonate them in the water? Those are the questions, and the other, what I tell you right now, who dares to put the bell to the cat and say-

Those are some of the questions that you would make to a federal agency.

Of course, I have thought about it, I even talked about it to an agent that came not long ago, that was talking about the lobster and the snapper, we even talked with him about the situation of the fishermen. I presided an organization of fishermen. Almost all the fishermen have died of cancer, even in my family only, out of six men, four have had cancer, and two of us had had it twice, And the other ones what do they say? This is a matter of [CROSSTALK]. I can take you to the neighborhood where we grew up, right now, there has been a boom this days of brain tumors. My mom had a brain tumor, the neighbor to the West, the lady had a brain tumor, her daughter had a brain tumor. The neighbor to the left had a brain tumor; the neighbor two houses down another brain tumor; the neighbor in front to the right with a brain tumor, hopeless, waiting the day to day. A boy in Esperanza that worked in the impact area, buried the ashes two weeks ago. A partner, a young man, a friend of mine, that he visited me in the hospital when they were giving me chemo, he is still in intensive care because he had a surgery due to a malign brain tumor. He has a title in Oceanography, and he has two masters, in aquaculture and mariculture. He got a job with Fish [INAUDIBLE], all of the sudden, he felt a little weird, he thought it was sinus, they took an X-ray, and at the moment, that was weird, you'll have a surgery, that has to be benign, they are always benign, and when he sees the neurologist says, I don't know, I feel well, I'll order a biopsy. When he did the biopsy, malign. He had a surgery, the surgery lasted 12 hours.

A sad story that you are telling me, the fight continues.

Of course.

Health.

Look at me. I just got out this Sunday, one before, from the 6th chemo round.

Chemotherapy.

A chemo that is not common, I went to the hospital, and during six continuous days, 24 hours without stopping they were giving me chemo, I don't know how, I think that because god, faith on him and the desire to keep fighting, I got out after the 7th day. The other patients that are there, this man that I told you that I saw there, came in during my last round, he came in too, the same day, I got out, I came back two weeks later, and he's still there, he can't go out, because, it's so violent what they do to you, that the plaquettes drop, the white blood cells drop, the hemoglobin drops, the potassium drops, the magnesium drops, all of that drops. I met a young girl that I went to give her this- I hadn't seen her, I always went out for a walk in the mornings, I always had gone out for a walk. I walks from 35 to 49 minutes, and I walked 1,650 steps in the halls, but that young girl that I met one day in the hall, we were talking, she completed this past week, three months without being able to get out of the hospital, she's there. My brother went to Fajardo to an oncologist, there were nine patients that day, seven where from Vieques. Compared, Fajardo how many people do they have? Luquillo, Rio Grande, etc. You get there, and there ae nine patients, and out of nine, seven are from Vieques, it cannot be a coincidence, but it's supposed that we should be well nourished, eating fresh fish practically alive, because I'll tell you one thing, I go by to the supermarket fish department, I pass and I feel like throwing up because the fish stinks like rotten, I say, how can people eat this? And people talk about, please- I go out to fish, and the day that I come back from fishing I come down the road exclaiming, I call my wife and I tell her, prepare arepas, when I get there, I have fish, I can eat from that fishing today and next day.

Does your wife help you with the process of cleaning the fish?

My wife fished a lot of years with me. My wife and I started dating in 1978, went to college, she studied nursing in the medical area of the OPR, and we arrived to Vieques because we wanted to live in Vieques, but we didn't get a job and we went both to fish. My dad told me, you don't get a job, but you know how to fish, take the sea on your own. And we went back to the sea, and at the beginning she didn't know about the ground, it seemed that her feet were round, that she was standing on billiard balls, because she kept falling down; we fished in a 21 feet wooden boat, the pole was like this, or if not by hand pulling up the fishing baskets, and she did it by hand, we came back with the hands destroyed, but we went out to get in an honest way the milk for the boy, that I have to say, I had to buy two boxes of 48 cans of Carnation milk besides she breast fed him, but his was a good eater, and we had to figure it out, the boy cries and you can't tell him there's no more, we went out to fish, and she went with me for years.

And thanks to those outings you were able to feed your family, thanks to fishing.

Yes, and then, when the boat went to land, now in 2017, it broke, the art of fishing was lost totally, and I told my wife, we don't have art, there are not boats to fish.

When you say that it was lost, is it because the hurricane?

The hurricane.

There were a lot of loss.

Yes. All the art, I had more than 100 fishing baskets, I had about 45 fishing boxes, and you lost all that. You lost the rope, you lost the buoy, then you are naked, and a naked chicken don't get on a stick, and we decided to go to the PAN program, and we arrived to the PAN program, the girl that took care of me, she tells me, I was looking you in the system, you are not there, you have never received helped, we have never applied for help from the government, from PAN, we fished and we had to live comfortable from fishing, and why to ask if we really could live, that is for other ones, and that is the way, my parents always, if there was something that he did, it was to emphasize honesty and work, he told us that we had to learn to put out hand into the mud, and it didn't matter that is was dirty and that it stunk, but the money that fell in your hands, had to be honest, and with that god blessed you. God has never left us, in the worse moments he had appeared. We are tranquil, even when this moment came, we had analyzed and thought the possibility of the kind of cancer that I could have. We had said that if it was a Hopkins tumor, it was worth it to fight; if it was not Hopkins I wasn't going to get the treatment because it wasn't worth it.

You mentally-

We got prepared, but we were tranquil, his will. When they did the biopsy, the results came in, and the results says that I have a non-Hopkins one. and the non-Hopkins have 60 different types of non-Hopkins, and out of the 60 ones, there is a type that represents the 1.2 to 2% of the total of the 60. But it's absolutely aggressive, absolutely rare, but violent and it wants always to get to the brain.

We know that.

Out of the bad one, the worst, and when that moment I came, they told me what I have, I went to feed some animals of a friend of mine that is not in Vieques, and my wife texts me, and I told her, don't text me, let’s talk on the phone, and she said, I can't ta1k, and what I told her was, don't question god, that is what I told her, don't question him. I know that it makes you mad, but easy, god gives you the sore but it gives you the remedy, and like that we kept on, and then we decided that I was to get the six day treatment, 24 hours, because I told her, I'm going to take it, you know why? Because I want to feel what a cancer patient feels. And they had given me 43 radiations for another kind of cancer, and everybody lost weight, Prieto gained six pounds after the treatment. And when they started to be strong, I want to feel what cancer patients feel, because I'm always protesting and fighting for people, I can talk and say what a cancer patient feels, and I took it, and it's not easy, but it's part of a process, and we are there.

Fighting.

Yes. And I don't know what's going to happen in three weeks, four weeks, they will do a nuclear study to see what happened, to see if we were successful or not. It's not easy.

God willing. You are with your mind.

It will be what it has to be.

Sure.

Because it's going to be god's will, not mine, but at least I went once to fish.

You went?

I already went.

That was the next question that I was going to make.

I already went once to fish, and I got some lobsters for my daughter, she's pregnant, she needed some crickets, she studied culinary art, and she was a teacher of culinary arts here at the superior school, but she wasn't working. We went, we caught the lobster and I said, here you have so you can cook it, and she made a meal with lobster, and she used the crickets.

Do you already have the fishing stuff?

I have some in the water, what happens is that when I got sick, if there is something that still is being there for centuries, is piracy, that is out there in abundance. I'm going to get one more headache and a problem, no, I'm very relaxed, as I told you. I can tell you that I have seen people, and I know of people that had stolen from me, art, this, and that, and until now, from all those people, 27 are dead, and we are here, and I always repeat, give me the strength and we keep fighting, and we keep going until god wants. I'm one of the ones that I believe that we encounter- There has to be a judgment, and we are going to have our prize and we also are going to have to answer for things not too good, because non of us are saints.

But always going forward, never look bad.

We are relaxed, tell me-

From this little map, you have to know it, this is the map that we use in the Fishing tactics program. Every quadrant of this is two nautical miles, it's telling you exactly were, what are you are fishing. Here what I want is, if you can point more or less the areas that are of main interest to fish, according to your experience, around Vieques, or around where you fish, and what area is that you produce the most.

Look, this flat area here, there are some quadrants here, this is in front of Media Luna, Bioluminescent Bay, Puerto Tropez[ph], look, from all this shore, from the area-

You can mark it.

Give me- From the area from up here, what happens is that it depends of what you are looking for.

The area of main interest in fishing according to your experience, and the area that you have fished the most.

Let me explain in to you to see if you understand me. Fishing is like agriculture in land, you plant and harvest by times, and sometimes there are a lot of melons, and sometimes there are a lot of china, and you are going to look for china to Lares a Juncos, there are festivals there, but if you want to look for breadfruit, there are other places where there is breadfruit. If you go to the South of Puerto Rico, to Santa Isabel, there are some kind of products, the same happen in the water. Up here before you could go and up here there was the so called Seco, that is a place where grouper aggregate, and Diente Sable, that is the tiger grouper.

Is the grouper there?

That no one catches it.

In what area did you say?

This, up here. That, no one catches it, it's been decades that nobody catches tiger grouper. Before, the diver went there and dove in, but it's 135 feet, and that before was a place- It's a place that at different times, you have excellent kind of fish aggregation, several, different ones. One time you have the tiger grouper, but that grouper, when it arrives there, it's synchronized with the moon, all is synchronized with the moon. The first crescent moon of February comes here; the moon came today, you go tomorrow and you go tomorrow, and they are there. But there are hundreds of thousands.

One aggregations.

Gigantic. And the same way the sharks arrive to eat them.

A feast.

A feast, bunches. They arrive and those groupers, they eat all of them, they end up with them. There is a ravine, not because I dove in, but because I took divers over there, and I fished there, so there is a ravine where before the divers went to look there, and they dove in from a deeper ravine, 145 and 150 feet behind the guajiros[ph], some rocks down, there were some melons.

It's venous, guajiro is yellow.

There, a fisherman caught a 66 pounds grouper.

That area, that ravine.

That ravine, next to the guajiro down there, but all these areas here are good for fishing, because here the Atlantic meets the Caribbean, and you have a current, you can see, all these sides, both sides are excellent fishing areas. The navy questioned, why do you insist in fishing there? Why if you say that we are dropping bombs and killing? Yes, because the currents are the ones that bring the food, and therefor, you detonated, killed, but it keeps moving, the currents are incredible in those areas. You literally can see the Caribbean sea color and the Atlantic color, and they clash, you see the line, and the sea here is very choppy, a lot of short waves, and you crossed over and fell into the another one, and you stood there, and here is flat and that one is poisoned, shaking. I once went up there and I took it, and after I crossed over I was jumping, I stopped the boat, and we were like this so slow, and the sea from there on was blue like the color of your sweater, and the other side where we were at it look a greenish blue. Incredible, you have to see it to believe, to really believe it, but they were clashing into each other, creating a wall, you saw that wall, a line.

It's a show.

For, to whom to may concern, I'm going to give you this as information, here there is an area that I had it mark to the front, but I don't see well.

Let me tell me.

But later we can look for it, but it's more out here, it's around here. There I got- I told this man, place of grouper aggregation, coral hind. I went the month of November trying to find a grouper a couple of month before the ban, and I threw some fishing baskets there, and when I picked the fishing baskets up, that I spotted squid and so on, and when I went there all the baskets had the grouper, I was with my son, we opened the door, and we threw them all to the water. It's an aggregation place, I had marked it on my GPS, but that one broke, but that is a place to study to whom may concern, young men that are working on their marine biology master and so, but it's a place to be studied. Nowadays you don't even have to go down, nowadays if you have an underwater drone, you throw it down there, you see. But it really is an unique place because they are aggregation places. Over these shores, all this next to the shore, from down here, all these shores up, they are good for lobster, and these falls here, there, this one that is here in front- What happens it's that this is not to visible, the definition, but these falls in here, the falls there they are too very good for red snapper.

There is the drop, there is the wall.

Exact. Even you know what is there? A lot of boats are going there to catch swordfish in those falls.

Those are recreational.

Yes, recreational. And one of the problems is, not to enforce the ban, Natural resources has a problem with the red hind ban subject. The red hind grows slowly, the individuals that are left are minimal, but one of the main problems that they have stablishing the ban was that Natural resources protects the spawning but they don't protect the mating. The spawning is less likely than the diver, and if the diver is not good at spotting and if the diver swims too far from the bottom, when the red hind is spawning he doesn't see it, because the red hind digs itself, and the red hind only- Let me look for it, I saw one around here. It's so dark.

Is it dark? Let me turn the lights on.

This is like a wolf's mouth.

The partner- Here you turn it on.

Look.

-

The light brown one. Look. When the red hind is going to spawn, the only thing that the red hind leaves out is this little thing, nothing more. It's dug in and you don't see any of this, it's all in spawning, the only thing that you see is when he move the eye, they take their eyes out here, and the only thing that you are going to see is that they did this, and you say, something moved, and you are going to see the mouth and you take it from here and you pull it out. These is the place where they mate, around here is where the red hind mate, they get end with end and they get their genitalia out and they mate here around this part. That is why the red hind, until they don't grow the fin, they grow in a spiral way, and until they don't grow the fin, they haven't reach sexual maturity, once that this fin is made, they are able to mate, and here is the mating place. What happens? As I told you, when they are spawning they are dug in, but when they are going to mate, if there are 1,000 red hinds here, in this part here, you are going to find 1,000 red hinds clashing into each other, over a spot where they can mate. Since you are coming from up there you can see them, and that is amazing, you go to the bottom, you kneeled down, you sat down, however you do it, regularly two knocks, because what you move it the wrist. And right here, in the bad, you have a knife, and here you already had grabbed the nail. You grab the nail and you swim to the other one, in the case when they are all together, you don't move. A lot of the times you turn them upside down to see that you don't grab them again and you keep going, and the tank is empty, and you went up and came down with the other one, and next day you marked it and went down.

And you finished them.

And you finished them. So, if they don't mate it cannot be spawning, so they protect the spawning but they don't protect- And when are they more vulnerable? When they are mating, because they are at the place where everybody can see them and they are all together. While they are not mating, there's one here, there's another one over there and there, you catch this one, that one, then you put this away, I have to go down there, no, here there are all of them clashing into each other, looking for a mate. If two clash and they both are male, let's go, that one is a female. That Natural resources hasn't done, and we tell them. They either haven't created a recreational fishing license to be collect money and to have control. Recreational fishing, people catch a yellowtail snapper this size and they kill it to get a small piece as a bait and throw the rest away, and who enforces the law? The red snapper ban comes, and you see the charters bringing people to fish red snapper because they want to give them a show, and anyway they get involved. I had to say once to one on a yacht, you know that the red snapper is banned, right? Yes, we brought people. You charged them how much? You want to give them, but come on. Here there were people that came here to fish from the islands. Once the navy left, that there were no issues with the army, there are a boat rent business in Puerto Rico to come to fish here, and they don't pay the state either, or pay salaries for that, and they have how many boats? And they rent them. People from Salinas come here, from Patillas, from Yabucoa, from all those places they come here to fish. And the problem is that all that they catch, they take with them; they say that here the fishermen leave what they fish, because the fishermen here don't take the grouper that it's still growing in a spiral way, one, it's small, and other one, it's not legal either, but since there is no one- What is the point, Jesus told me, we have to measure them, we have to see how many groupers they caught, but what is the point, the grouper ban is on, and Natural Resources is not present. The day that the ban started, that day they are investigating, but they already caught them, what for? If you go to San Juan, you are going to find individuals offering you young lobsters, in San Juan, in San Jose, back there, offering you hawksbill turtle, no one needs a hawksbill to live. Us, when it wasn't legal, I was a child, it was allowed to catch them, and my dad caught them and we ate them, but when they were gone-

Did you catch hawkbill turtles when it wasn't banned?

Yes, we caught them and we ate, but it was to eat it.

To eat.

It wasn't to sell it or to make business. There people here that sold them, and they caught every day 10, 12, 15. Of course that the commercialization ends with everything. Any other question?

Interviewee, those are all the questions, I thank you a lot for your time, and really those anecdotes, that story about your dad, your family, as a fisherman like you. Any last thing that you want to share with me?

What I can tell you that really the real fisherman is born not made, it's in his blood. My dad made his own fishing net, he made his own fishing baskets, nowadays the majority of the fishermen that want to go into the sea, don't know how to make a fishing net, and if we really want to develop some kind, I think that we are in time, we need a new generation of fishermen, but we also need a new generation of fishermen that see the sea as something that is part of themselves, that they can integrate it in their minds and in their hearts. If this doesn't happen, unfortunately we are going to fail, we need too- The desire for tourism is going to take us to the elimination of the majority of the species because there is no control here in the coasts on what beaches are going to be used for tourism, and which ones are not. And it's tourism, it's jet ski, it's kayak, it's everything, we have a bay and someone came up to say that kayaks are environmental friendly, kayaks are drums in the sea, the vibrations are not good, one; two, kayaks have holes in the bottom of the sea. The bioluminescent bay have a dinoflagellate that the most violent enemy that they have is human. You have people in a bay that go out from the restaurant after eating and drinking to go on a trip in a bay, where there is not a restroom, not even a portable one. The restroom of all those tourists, sometime there are more than 1,000 people in that bay at night, is the kayak. Where I was once looking, a few days before that Maria came and set the boat down there, the rope of an anchorage that I had there in the bay, and I didn't find it, and I prepared a four legs and a quarter garapin[ph], and when I threw that garapin the first time, I brough out two cans stuck in the hole of the zipper, with two legs in two came out. Cans of Maria from the hole of the zipper, from where they are opened, how many cans must be down there for this to happen? And I took out underwear, and I took out shorts, and I took out women's bikinis, and I took out brassieres, to not finish taking out, the last thing that I took out was a chicken hip bone stuck to a piece of mud in the garapin. Where is the control? Right now the municipality asked-

Very important.

That they handed over the bay to them, but you don't have studies about weight capacity or maximum weight level, nothing of that has been done. In 2009, around 2009, 2010 that Guerrero was in.

Carmen Guerrero.

Carmen yes, they said that it was going to be done, a meeting was schedule, the meeting was suspended, they never called back for it, and that is how everything stayed. Carmen went to EPA, and the rest followed Galetti[ph]. I think that there are people that have the desire to work but there are people that really the only thing that they are interested in is the 15 and the 30, that way. When I mentioned the kayaks, and I mentioned the jet ski, the problem is that the jet ski and the kayak, to run- I also mentioned at the beginning, that my dad took us to catch sardines, the place where my dad took me to catch sardines, his dad took him there, he was born in 1,800 and some, to catch bait. The places are the same, and if you don't protect those places of aggregation, if you don't have sardines, if you don't have grouper, you break that first link and you are not going to have the other species and the human being is going to starve to death. If the creel doesn't exist, that is almost microscopic, you eliminate the biggest giants that are around the planet that are the whales.

One example.

When are we going to start? And they always say that it's going to be done, I was young, I went with my dad to help him when I was little. I had to live from fishing, today my grandchildren go with me to fish.

Very good.

My son Melvin, I took him to the sea and I didn't let him use a knife, because he was so 1ittle, and I gave him galvanized wire and I told him, I want you to pass it through the eyes, hook three fish, and that's it, I'll do the rest. He was sitting down on the box of the engine, a four cylinders Perkins engine, there all day long, in high seas, very little, four years and a half, five, he was. Even today he fishes with me.

Very good.

He's already 30.

He's the future.

That was the one that I-

And your son is going to keep teaching it to continue the generations.

Of course, to continue the generations, but we also need the regulatory agencies, that they do their job because there are more the ones that don't comply with the law that the ones that comply with the law. And you have people that economically have the economic power and that some have gotten it in a good way, and others in a bad way, that economic power.

Yes.

And they are keeping everything. And how do you control that? They are going to end with it, not only they are going to end with the jobs, but the people that are supposed to be protecting the resources, but what is going to be left to protect?

Interviewee, with these last words I appreciate a lot your time. Here we end the recording, we are interviewing the commercial fisherman Interviewee Interviewee Merendez, this is Wilson Santiago, the interviewer. Thank you very much Interviewee.

Nice evening.