

From Steve Albrecht's **Ticking Bombs** book (Irwin, 1994)

### **The Robert Mack Prison Interview**

What we know for certain is this: On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1992, in San Diego, California, Robert Earl Mack, a 25-year assembly-line employee for the General Dynamics Company, shot and wounded his supervisor- James English- and shot and killed an industrial relations representative- Michael Konz- following his dismissal at a termination hearing.

Mack was born and raised in San Diego. He has four brothers and five sisters who all live in the city. He was married once and divorced, with three children from the marriage and two step-children with his live-in girlfriend.

What makes 44-year-old Robert Mack so interesting is not so much that he killed one person and wounded another at his work site- thereby becoming one of the many statistics that make up the subject of violence in the workplace- but that he is still alive to tell his side of the story.

As the majority of workplace violence incidents show, the suspects in these cases often kill themselves immediately after they commit their homicides. In comparison with most nonwork-related homicides, where the incidence of post episode suicide is rare, workplace homicides seem to be littered with not only the bodies of the victims but of the perpetrators as well.

In this respect, Robert Mack is anomaly; a rarity if you will, who is one of the few surviving murderers from the worksite.

And not only is Robert Mack still alive, he is also remarkably lucid, rational, and in short, not noticeably insane, like some of his workplace homicide counterparts.

When brought to a pretrial hearing in Orange County, alleged Dana Point, California, post office murderer Mark Hilbun looked gaunt and disheveled. Press accounts tell us that Hilbun had gone on a hunger strike

of sorts while in jail and refused to eat his meals. This, coupled with his bizarre behavior during his flight to avoid arrest points many fingers toward his clearly disturbed mental capacity.

Larry Hansel, locked in the same San Luis Obispo prison facility as Robert Mack, showed many signs of instability during the court proceedings following his arrest for killing two Elgar Corporation executives in San Diego, California.

No, for all he is - a convicted workplace murderer who also severely wounded another man - Robert Mack is far from crazy. While he admits to having several near "blackouts"- after he unceremoniously received his termination letter from his employer of 25 years, and after he shot and killed an industrial relations manager and wounded his first-line supervisor- Mack is a rational, communicative, soft-spoken man.

To put his case into perspective, Mack was not fired because he did "crazy things" at work. He was not involved in workplace violence acts prior to this one, and he did not draw attention to himself as "someone we'd better watch out for." For most of his 25-year career as an assembly worker in the General Dynamics plant, he did his job and he went home. Only in the latter stages of his work there did his performance start to deteriorate.

Following a long period of absenteeism, tardiness, and unexcused movements inside and outside the plant, Mack's supervisors, particularly James English, his direct boss, began to lose patience with him. Because of his seniority, security clearance, and job designation as a "floater," or one who could work in a number of different plant areas or around different missile projects, Mack could move about the inside of the plant at will.

He already had a reputation for frequently going in and out of the plant, ostensibly to "run errands" for co-workers, or to buy snack items for himself and others when the local "roach coach" lunch wagon would arrive at the plant.

In the months before the shooting, he complained of car trouble, and since he took the bus from his home to the plant early each morning, he would often arrive late to punch in. Sometimes he would be late a few minutes, other times a few hours, and still other times he would not show up at all saying he missed his bus or had car trouble.

For the most part, he was a good, loyal GD employee. But his attendance problems began to grate on his supervisor. The supervisor's attempts to discipline and later terminate Mack for his inability to follow attendance policies and work rules led to Mack's final downfall as both a normal employee and a rational human being.

Mack's very existence, the fact that he lives, should tell everyone who looks to problem-employee profiles to weed out potential killers to be wary. Mack doesn't fit all the elements in the profile of a workplace killer. Some of the factors in the profile clearly apply to him and others are not even close. And yet, it happened. One person was killed, another injured.

While the profile can serve as an important data source, it's far from foolproof. Even if you think you know what to look for, you'll always find exceptions. Profiles can only offer you general considerations, not written-in-stone absolutes. The danger is when someone in the personnel department says, "Well, this applicant or employee only meets one or three or five of these criteria, so he can't be so bad," or "We don't have anybody that sounds like this profile candidate at our company. So therefore, we have nothing to worry about."

In a sense, if you have an employee who is making threatening statements, acting out highly aggressive behavior, and making you feel nervous and even fearful, consider yourself somewhat fortunate. As paradoxical and even strange as this sounds, it's true. With the disturbed, vocal employee, you and the people around you are getting a warning of the violent behavior that may follow. It may be possible to successfully intervene in that person's life - with psychological counseling, discipline procedures, extra security precautions, or even acute mental health care -

to save his life and the people around him. The Robert Macks of the world don't give us much warning. And as a result, tragedy can strike around us and we never had a clue.

The "silent killers," who sit at home or at work and brood about their treatment and inwardly curse their fate, are the ones who can send chills down the collective spine of a company. Robert Mack is an extreme example of what you can find in the real world; a person filled with such internal turmoil that he strikes when you don't expect it.

What follows is an exclusive interview with Robert Mack, which took place with Steve Albrecht on May 20, 1993, inside the California Department of Corrections San Luis Obispo Men's Colony, where he is serving two 17-to-life terms for the General Dynamics shootings. (The interview took place over a 1½ hour period and has been edited and excerpted for clarity, quality, and length.)

Along the way, we will make comments, rebuttals, and observations about Mack and his story. His account of what happened is his opinion, his singular view of the events that went on around him, and his reaction to the injustices- real or otherwise - he perceived around him.

What, we ask ourselves, do Robert Mack and the profile characteristics for workplace violence perpetrators have in common? What is correct about Mack as it pertains to the profile? Incorrect? Not conclusive either way? What can we learn from his actions, prior to the shootings, during them, and after the incident? What did General Dynamics do right or what did it do wrong in its handling of the Mack termination proceedings? What assumptions did either side make about the other? What perceptions or misconceptions did each side bring to the room where Mack was fired after 25 years at the only company where he had ever worked?

We'll examine one real-life termination event that had tragic consequences. We'll also look at why this particular termination failed the

employee Golden Rule humanity test. What this interview reveals, either directly or tacitly, shows us what goes on in the mind of an employee who felt he had reached the point in his life and career where he saw no other alternative but to bring a handgun to the plant and start firing.

Steve Albrecht: **SA**

Robert Mack: **RM**

**SA:** What kind of jobs did you hold prior to coming to General Dynamics?

**RM:** None. That was my only job.

**SA:** So you're 44 right now, then you'd have been 19 years old when you started working for them? Straight out of high school? You've been working for them a long time.

**RM:** Yeah, straight out of high school.

**SA:** What was your first job for them?

**RM:** Plastic fabrication.

**SA:** So you moved up the line?

**RM:** Yeah. I moved up the line.

(Since Mack spent his entire adulthood working for one company, there is certainly no evidence to indicate any connection to profile point 18-migratory job history.)

**SA:** What I'm interested in is what was going on prior to this incident happening and what was going on with you. What thoughts were going on in your head that led up to this shooting? What were you thinking a year before, a month before, a day before? I'm interested in what you were thinking about prior to this and what led you to this step.

**RM:** Well, the thoughts in my head were somewhat naïve. I didn't understand that this situation was coming to what it was.

**SA:** You mean your discipline hearing?

**RM:** The discipline hearing. I understood my supervisor [James English] had some kind of a problem with me.

**SA:** Was he your direct supervisor?

**RM:** Yes he was.

**SA:** He didn't work on the floor though, right?

**RM:** No, he worked on the floor. He was my first-line supervisor.

**SA:** Was he a union member as well?

**RM:** No.

**SA:** Oh, he was management?

**RM:** Yes, and these disciplinary things that he was putting upon me, it was like he was checking me out. There was a meeting that I overheard where the general foreman was talking about absenteeism. I heard him saying that the company would fire you and make you lose your house, your home, your cars, and your discipline for yourself at home. And this could cause your wife to leave you, so you might lose your wife and kids.

(Clearly, Mack's self-esteem is distinctly tied to his life as a working adult with a real job. To lose a job would cause you to lose face, to lose your possessions, to lose it all. The stage is already being set for a bitter labor-management showdown between Mack and English - profile point 13: chronic labor-management disputes. Mack discusses the root of his problem with his supervisor - his increasing number of absenteeism and tardiness incidents):

**SA:** Okay, to hurt my situation there, they denied my hours change. So that Saturday I was late. That Monday, I was four minutes late and then on Tuesday, I think I came in somewhere around an hour or so late. These were all events that happened in one session. And before I had a chance to realize how close I was [to being fired].

(Mack continues to talk about problems with his supervisor, his work schedule, and his inability to get to work on time):

**RM:** And so they kept messing around with my second shift [work schedule]. This is all at Christmas time, everybody's Merry Christmas and

Jingle Bells and stuff like that. There was another incident I didn't understand. I didn't realize that English took a vacation day, one of my Christmas paydays away from me. He took the whole day away from me.

**SA:** Because of absenteeism and being late?

**RM:** Yeah, because of absenteeism. There was a flaw in the absenteeism part. I told them I got there at 5:30 am, and the gate showed me punching in at 5:31 am, and so they denied me my pay for that entire week. And I struggled and tried hard to get to work on time. That was the thing that started the whole ball rolling for a stretch, because I kept going back to payroll with my time slips. That was the pay for 5:30. Then they found out two days later, it was 5:31, so they cancelled my paycheck.

**SA:** So they held it up?

**RM:** For that day, right.

**SA:** That was James English who did that?

**RM:** He did that.

**SA:** Did you feel like he was building something against you?

**RM:** It seems like it, but I was trying too hard just to get the money that I had worked for.

**SA:** Was it like he had it in for you?

**RM:** At that time I wasn't really thinking that he had it in for me but I was a little too naïve.

**SA:** But you feel that way today, that he had it in for you?

**RM:** Yeah. So he docked me for an hour. That was another thing they weren't supposed to do. They weren't supposed to dock me for an hour.

(By now, Mack is facing profile point 1 squarely on- disgruntled regarding perceived injustice at work. He feels his supervisor, English, holds a grudge against him and wants to go after Mack for his tardiness. At this point, Mack's late arrivals have caused his relationship with his supervisor to rapidly deteriorate. Mack is in jeopardy of getting suspended and even

fired. His foray into profile point 16 - complaints of heightened stress at work - is building rapidly.)

**SA:** The next day they were going to suspend you?

**RM:** The next day. But that day, they took me down to the meeting to suspend me.

**SA:** Right.

**RM:** So, when I found the general foreman after our talk there, I told him and he said, "Oh no, Mack, no." I said, "Yeah we just left from down there." He said, "I don't have any idea why English wanted to suspend you, you know your work and everything is OK. You're fine as far as I'm concerned." I said, "Well you need to tell this to Mr. English, because he just took me down there to get me suspended."

**SA:** Right.

**RM:** So, he said, "Well, I'll tell you what, we'll talk about it tomorrow morning in my office and not down in Industrial Relations." And the next morning, I came in there, and Mr. English took me to IR to go before the general foreman.

**SA:** So the shop steward didn't make the meeting?

**RM:** He didn't make the meeting at all.

**SA:** Did you think you were in a bad way right then or...?

**RM:** I was in a bad way because now I had no [union] protection over me. So, I went on down to IR and the general foreman says, "Don't worry about it Mack I'll take care of everything." Okay, supposedly he's gonna take care of everything. Then we got into the room, and they asked about me going in and out of the gate. OK, well that was fine, because I do it all the time. But they wanted to investigate it further. So, what they did was put me on suspension pending an investigation.

**SA:** No pay?

**RM:** No pay. All right, this is after Christmas, this is after New Year's, the day after and the next day. See how everything happens so closely together?

**SA:** So did you go home right after that meeting?

**RM:** Well yeah, after the meeting there I did. They held me up and told me that I'd be on suspension until further investigation. They took my badge and everything and they sent me home. So I was at home for three more days. Now let's back it up. I went through Christmas trying to get my money that I did not get from the previous time.

(At this point, Mack is feeling the financial pressure from the first procedural hold on his holiday paycheck. Now suspended, he faces an uncertain future with no pay.?)

**RM:** Okay, this is starting all the stress rolling because I did not have a good Christmas at all. And I was waiting and waiting and waiting to go back to work. I had come back to work after two weeks, so now I had to go two long weeks without any pay. So what little Christmas money I had left over, I had to use that.

**SA:** So you were hurting by then?

**RM:** I'm hurting by then. This is a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year's and all that other stuff. So now I'm hurting for cash, ok? But I have three days off on suspension. Well, those three days turned into three weeks.

**SA:** How did you know that you weren't going to come back after the three days?

**RM:** Well, they called me and told me my interview was scheduled for a date.

**SA:** To come back, you mean?

**RM:** Yes, but by then, it was not to come back to work; it was for a termination.

**SA:** Like a hearing?

**RM:** A hearing for a termination.

**SA:** Let me see if I understand this. They suspend you for three days and then they told you not to come back for three weeks until this hearing date?

**RM:** Right.

**SA:** So you sat home all that time?

**RM:** All that time without pay. No welfare, no unemployment. No nothing, no organization, no nothing.

**SA:** No help from the union?

**RM:** Nothing from the union either.

(Mack is just about to receive a formal termination notice in the mail, after sitting home on unpaid suspension for three weeks.)

**RM:** So when I got this letter in the mail...

**SA:** Telling you what the date was?

**RM:** Telling me what date to come back there. When the letter came in the mail to me, I said to myself, "I finally got a letter to go back to work." I had sat out all this time here without any money and then I finally got a letter to go back to work.

(Thinking it's a letter inviting him back to work; Mack does not open it right away. Little does he know that the letter really will tell him he is fired from the only job he has ever held as an adult.)

**RM:** All right. So I didn't open it as soon as I got it, because I wanted to read it by myself and see when I'm supposed to come back to work. But this letter had termination in it, instead of coming back to work.

**SA:** So how soon after you got the letter was the day of the shooting?

**RM:** About a week.

(From the day he got the letter until he fired the fatal shots that wounded English and killed Konz, Mack sat home and grieved about his fate. For the first time in his adult life, he was now unemployed. His self-esteem level is about to hit rock bottom.)

**SA:** What I'm interested in is the point when you got the letter. What were your thoughts and feelings?

**RM:** Like my whole career is gone. I got a letter, right? And the letter said "termination."

(The following description of Mack's state of mind and his intense reaction to the unceremonious termination letter he received after 25 years of service sounds much like a psychotic episode (profile point 20-psychiatric impairment). He truly believed he was having a breakdown and describes it with emotion):

**RM:** And I was stunned by termination. I tried to ball this letter up and it wouldn't ball up. It was still in my hands. So I tried stomping it with my feet and the letter was still in my hands. Then the letter burst into flames, and I sat there and shook it and tried to get it to go out until it finally went out.

**SA:** That's what you were thinking, or that's what was happening?

**RM:** That's what was happening. And it kept saying "termination, termination, termination." But I plugged my ears up so I couldn't hear the word termination. So, after that incident there, then it finally cooled down. I went and got some cold water and put the letter on top of the TV. When I came back into the room, "termination, termination" was what went through my head, termination. I've lost everything, everything I've worked for is gone. I'm not going back to work. What will the people think? How will I tell the people?

(This last statement gives us a further clue as to Mack's poor self-esteem and his belief that his very existence as a human being had suddenly ended because his job had ended. He continues to address a theme that says, "People won't like or respect me if I don't have a job." Mack describes more examples of his psychotic episode in full force now. The termination letter has turned into his constant tormentor and the object of his physical and mental suffering):

**RM:** Everything was racing through my head you know. And I went and sat down on the side of the bed and the TV burst into flames. Termination, termination. So I turned the TV off and got into bed. I was lying in the bed and the pillow burst into flames -termination. Every time I would stop to sleep this letter would appear. It would appear and sometimes it would chase me around the house and say "termination, termination." And no, I

couldn't turn this off because it was consistently chasing me, consistently appearing for maybe five days in a row. Every time I napped. I couldn't sleep at night. I had to leave my leg hanging over the side of the bed, swinging it. So in case the letter came, I'd be able to wake up.

(Mack locked himself in his home and agonized over what had befallen him. He had always been a closely guarded man; in his neighborhood he seemed to keep to himself and his family - profile point 2 -socially isolated, may be a loner).

**SA:** So you stayed at home and stewed for five days?

**RM:** Yeah.

**SA:** So by the time the five days went by, you were pretty wound up, pretty tight?

**RM:** I was wound up pretty tight.

(His feelings of rage and his emotional and physical instability are at a peak now. He has thought of nothing else but his pending termination hearing. Mack plans his own death to coincide with his termination hearing appearance.)

**SA:** So, let's move up to the day of the hearing.

**RM:** The night before, I figured it was time to terminate myself. I couldn't stand it anymore.

**SA:** Why?

**RM:** It was too much pressure on me.

**SA:** You wanted to kill yourself?

**RM:** Right. So that morning, I got up and I went out and got a gun.

**SA:** From the house or from somewhere else?

**RM:** Yeah, I bought one.

**SA:** You bought it from somebody?

**RM:** I bought it from somebody.

**SA:** So you decided that you wanted to kill yourself at work?

**RM:** Yes. If I would have killed myself at home it would have been a domestic problem. So, I had to go back to work where the problem all started from.

**SA:** At that time did you think English was the cause of the problem?

**RM:** I was still naïve. All I knew then was that my life was over with. Everything was torn up. Everything had bottomed out.

**SA:** OK.

**RM:** There was nothing else left for me.

**SA:** How did you get to work? Did you take the bus?

**RM:** No, my girlfriend drove me.

(Mack tries to "make his peace with the world" during the trip to the 1:00 pm termination hearing with his girlfriend in the car.)

**RM:** And I wanted to tell her some things, like, "Just take care of things around the house. Try to make a good life for yourself out there."

**SA:** You're trying to sort of wrap things up?

**RM:** Right. So then, I told her a few little small things, you know, goodbye and I loved you. I did everything I could to take care of you all.

**SA:** So when you got down to the [General Dynamics] plant, she dropped you off at the gate and said, "I'll pick you up in an hour or.."?

**RM:** No, I told her to go ahead on. Well, I knew I wasn't coming back. I was going on because this was my own doing. It had nothing to do with her.

(Mack is now armed with a .38-calibre revolver and is ready to confront his accusers- namely his supervisor, James English, and the industrial relations manager assigned to his termination hearing, Michael Konz.)

**SA:** So you went into the plant?

**RM:** I went into the plant with the gun on me.

**SA:** Did you know what you were going to do then?

**RM:** I knew what I was going to do then. Mr. Konz came and got me. So I came on inside the gate, and then we went into a [interview] room in there. Now, I was originally charged for going in and out of the plant gate, so I should have been suspended for three days, but it was really for three weeks. Now, I was also charged for absenteeism, and I told them no, I should have been back to work here after those three days. I should have been back to work by then. I was at the point where I was arguing with them.

**SA:** So you didn't have any union representation there?

**RM:** The union was there.

**SA:** Were they going to bat for you?

**RM:** Yeah, they were going to bat for me. But the whole scenario had changed because they were going to fire me for something different now.

**SA:** Did that change your way of thinking were you still on the same path?

**RM:** I was still on the same path. My life was over regardless of what it was for.

(Mack's security clearance for the company was like a badge of honor for him. He was always careful not to speak of his work to his friends and neighbors. The fact that he had a security clearance and worked on defense-related projects was a tremendous source of pride for him. He makes the connection between his tardiness and absenteeism and the impact it has on General Dynamics. He makes the analogy that if his attendance problems caused the company to lose money - red ink- he was going to pay them back with his own life - red blood).

**RM:** So, then I kept wanting to talk so I could tell my side, and they wouldn't let me talk. What I had planned to tell them was that I held my top secret clearance to the utmost. I didn't reveal any secrets or anything and I hadn't revealed any secrets to the enemy sources. I came to work and gave my best that I could do at my job, while I was at work. If it meant so much to them for that one minute I was late, or if it meant so

much to the company and it put them so far in the red for the late days I came in, and the work I did put them so far in the red, then I was willing to give my blood back to them. I was willing to give myself back to them in blood, for their red ink.

(The stage has been set for Mack's murderous actions. He speaks of the way the termination hearing has gone poorly for him and another psychotic attack is imminent.)

**RM:** They kept telling me to shut up and so I did. And I kept trying to talk about my absenteeism. I sat there in anger, trying to get my words out, and then my mouth started getting dry, and I couldn't get any saliva in my mouth. My head started tingling, my hands started tingling, and then I knew I had to get up and get some water. These are the same symptoms that came when the big flash came.

**SA:** The day at the house, when you first received the termination letter?

**RM:** Right.

**SA:** It's like an anxiety attack you're having?

**RM:** Right. I had to get some cold water, so they took a break, a recess break.

**SA:** Did you get some water or anything?

**RM:** I wanted to get some water. And when I went to get some water, this big blur came over me. And that's when the shooting started.

**SA:** You had a blackout?

**RM:** Yeah, something like a blackout. I call it a stroke, because I lost a lot of my memory and stuff like that.

**SA:** When you "came to," were the cops there already?

**RM:** No. after the shooting took place, I went outside [the hearing room] or I was already outside when the shooting took place. I had already shot one man in the back of the head.

**SA:** English or Konz?

**RM:** And English had already been shot and now Konz has been shot now.

**SA:** Right.

**RM:** After shooting Konz, there was this Mexican man who was in the room. He worked in that room there. He was jumping up and down saying, "Don't do it, don't do it" and that caught my eye. And when that caught my eye, it made me look back around to where I could see there were two men laying down on the ground.

**SA:** You had figured out what you had done after you "came back around"?

**RM:** After I came back around. And so I asked the dude in there to go call my mother because something was wrong, OK? And he ran and hid. So that's when I went in and called my mother.

**SA:** The cops came soon after?

**RM:** The cops came soon after.

**SA:** How did you feel afterwards? I mean did you feel relieved or sad or...?

**RM:** No, I was still in a daze, like I was still in a haze. It was still hazy, even when there was a security guard there. He had a gun and he walked right past me with the gun pointing in the wrong direction.

**SA:** He didn't know what you were doing?

**RM:** He didn't know who I was. So I told him, "Hey, hey I'm over here, I'm over here," just like that. And I had the gun to my head. And he said, "No, don't do it, don't do it." And then I put the gun down and I went in and called my mother.

**SA:** Did you think that he talked you out of shooting yourself or you just decided that you didn't want to do that?

**RM:** Well, maybe so.

**SA:** You talked to your mom?

**RM:** So I talked to my mom. My mom said, "Don't do it" [commit suicide].

**SA:** Did you tell her what you had done?

**RM:** Yeah, there are two people who were down, two people who had been shot. And she said, "Oh, son what did you do that for?" I told her, "I don't know. I don't know what happened." But the two people were down.

(After speaking to his mother, Mack sat and waited for the police to arrive and then quietly gave himself up. The badly-injured English and the mortally-wounded Konz were rushed to the hospital as a sea of law enforcement and emergency personnel descended on the area near the termination hearing room.)

**SA:** When you think about it now, when you look back when you have some quiet times, can you recreate the shooting or is it still a blur?

**RM:** Well the shooting is still a blur, I'm not able to recreate the shooting yet.

**SA:** The day you decided to go to the plant with the gun, did you sort of preprogram something in your head like, "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to do this, and then I'm going to do this?"

**RM:** Yes, right.

(At this point in the interview, Mack makes a quick shift from speaking of wanting to kill himself to wanting to kill the others in the hearing room with him. He makes an odd connection with a number of outside agencies who he thinks will be interested in what he has done and the treatment he received from General Dynamics prior to the shooting. And Mack, as a black man, insinuates that his suspension and termination were also part of a race issue because his supervisor, English, was white.)

**SA:** So you set up a kind of plan, a scenario in your mind?

**RM:** Right, yeah.

**SA:** And did that involve shooting somebody?

**RM:** No, it didn't involve shooting anybody but myself.

**SA:** Killing yourself?

**RM:** Right, but I had to make sure that I killed them...

**SA:** Why?

**RM:** I would have both the company there and the union and there'd be a big investigation over it. It would involve the Department of Defense, there would be a civil rights investigation, because my civil rights were being violated, the NAACP would look into it to find out what happened, seeing how they treated me.

**SA:** Was it racial?

**RM:** It was a racial thing. One or two other things like that would have to be named in that investigation.

(From here, Steve tries to search for some kind of "prevention prescription" that will help other organizations avoid this problem for themselves.)

**SA:** If you think about it in terms of the [shooting] scenario you thought out in your head, is there anything anyone could have said or [done], or anyone who could have intervened to have changed your scenario?

**RM:** Well, yeah, if I would have told my girlfriend, my fiancée, if I would have told her, I'm sure she would have stopped the whole thing.

**SA:** I guess what I'm looking for is what kind of signs did you give off prior to this that they could have recognized?

**RM:** Oh, I was tremendously upset.

**SA:** On the job? All the time?

**RM:** Oh yeah, I was tremendously upset there at the meeting. I kept trying to talk and they wouldn't let me.

**SA:** Right. But prior to that, prior to being suspended, were you upset at work where your work had suffered? And did people notice a change in you, like they said, "What's the matter?"

**RM:** Well, there was no time for them to notice a change in me because I was never there.

**SA:** Most of this change took place at home?

**RM:** Most of all of this took place at home.

**SA:** Did you get the feeling that you had nothing to lose when you went to the termination hearing?

**RM:** I already lost everything.

(According to Mack, he showed no outwardly visible signs of his distress at work to others. The events that followed his suspension for attendance problems and his termination occurred so rapidly, that he didn't have much opportunity to interact with his co-workers. One day he was on the job, the next he was suspended.)

**SA:** Did you think of anybody who you feel is responsible for this? Do you blame the company or is it just you, or a combination of everything?

**RM:** I think it was a combination of everything. I think that the company made it all come together.

**SA:** The combination of your feelings, and the way the company made you feel, and the way people inside the company made you feel?

**RM:** Right.

**SA:** So if they had treated you differently, do you think it would have worked out another way?

**RM:** Yeah, if they had treated me differently.

**SA:** If you hadn't thought you were going to get fired, would you have crossed that line?

**RM:** I'd never have crossed that line, or if I knew I was being fired for a just reason, I wouldn't have had a problem.

(Here, Mack fails to see his attendance problem as a bona fide suspension or termination issue. He was even late to the termination hearing itself. He is clearly attempting to rationalize his murderous behavior as something that was "not my fault." He attempts to link his actions with the apparent suicide of another GD assembly plant worker in the parking lot of the facility. Mack told me a GD worker had sent the news clipping to him in prison.)

**SA:** So you felt like you were actually being fired for the wrong reason?

**RM:** Right.

**SA:** Why do you think other people at General Dynamics haven't done this kind of thing yet? Why do you think there have not been more workplace violence incidents at General Dynamics?

**RM:** Let me tell you why. There was one here last month [April 1993] for any employee who went out in the parking lot, got a gun, put it in his mouth and shot his head off.

**SA:** At General Dynamics?

**RM:** At the Convair Division [where Mack worked as well].

**SA:** It didn't make the newspapers?

**RM:** No, because it was a domestic problem.

**SA:** Was he an assembly worker, too?

**RM:** He was an assembly worker.

**SA:** Do you think he had the same kind of problems you did, with the way the company treated him?

**RM:** I think there was something in the way that the supervisors put the pressure on him that particular day, whether he would be terminated, or whether [the supervisor] was going to put some kind of destruction in his life. That's the same way I feel.

**SA:** Do you think that General Dynamics has policies that lead to this kind of [workplace violence] behavior?

**RM:** They have a policy there that makes you lose your wife, your house, your kids, cars...

**SA:** Do you feel that their policies put people in fear for their financial well-being?

**RM:** They put them in fear. Yes, that's true.

**SA:** How do you think you're different than the guy who's also treated like you but doesn't go back and do what you did? What's the difference between a guy who works for a boss who's a jerk and doesn't do anything,

and the guy that works for a boss who's a jerk and does take some kind of violent action against him?

**RM:** Some people are afraid. Some things [the company does] put a lot of fear inside them.

**SA:** So they're afraid to react or afraid to do something?

**RM:** They're afraid to react plus [the company] is trying to create that atmosphere where it equals fear.

**SA:** The company's trying to make people fearful?

**RM:** Well, the company makes you fearful because they give out directives and tell you what to do. If you don't do them, you'll be terminated.

**SA:** So this is all about control?

**RM:** Control.

**SA:** So you are under their control?

**RM:** Yes.

(It's hard to make much sense of this last exchange. Is Mack saying the work rules at General Dynamics make people afraid?)

**SA:** Did anyone at General Dynamics talk to you or ask you what you were feeling? Did anyone take you aside and say, "Gee, Robert, you know, let's help you do this or I can see you're having problems, or I want to help you through this...?"

**RM:** They should have done that.

**SA:** Who should have recognized that? The union people? Management people?

**RM:** The union people and the management people, but they kept telling me to shut up, to shut up and be quiet.

**SA:** During the hearing?

**RM:** During the hearing. That was my most frustrating point. I was banging on the table...

**SA:** The signs they could have seen in you, when you were excited, you were banging on the table, you were trying to tell them...?

**RM:** They could have avoided all that by stopping that [hearing].

**SA:** Do you think that if they had communicated with you in person rather than by the mail that it might have been a better way?

**RM:** Oh, yeah.

**SA:** This letter, it's like you had to read it away from the plant and you had...

**RM:** I had no idea. I had no idea what was gonna happen.

**SA:** So do you think if somebody had at least called or maybe come out to your house or ...?

**RM:** Right. Come or call, or said, "Hey Mack, we got something different going on now. We are going to talk about your absenteeism," then I would've had a chance to speak on my own behalf. I never had a fair trial.

(Again, Mack tries to draw a distinction away from his own attendance problem, which, regardless of whether it was for tardiness, going in and out of the plant during work, or absenteeism, is still a violation of company policy for probably every business in the nation. It's as if he's trying to make his situation different than another employee with a similar attendance problem.)

**SA:** If you had a chance to talk out your problems either with the manager or the labor union people, or the shop steward, or anybody like that, do you think this all could have been prevented?

**RM:** Yes, I do. I would have been able to explain the situation to them.

**SA:** During the three weeks' [suspension] time, do you feel like they sort of abandoned you? I mean, everybody just sort of cut you off and...?

**RM:** Well, everybody just left me cut off until it was time for them to pick me back up.

**SA:** Does the company offer counseling, in terms of mental health counseling, for people who are really upset and have problems that they need to talk about? Do they offer that?

**RM:** The company did not offer me that type of thing.

**SA:** Do they offer it in general?

**RM:** Now, the day after the shooting, they implied the counseling and things like that. But now it's in effect.

**SA:** Would you have taken the opportunity to go to counseling if they had offered it to you?

**RM:** Yes.

**SA:** In terms of your feelings, for mental health counseling, you would have gone if you had had a free chance?

**RM:** Yes.

(People who don't wish to see something, simply don't. If you don't want to know something is available, you won't. Dr. Mantell remembers San Diego police officers telling him they had no idea his police psychological services program was in effect, even six or seven years after the program was already in place. These statements by Mack are completely untrue, says Ron Davis, director of security for General Dynamics. He takes great offense at Mack's claim that he was not offered the chance to speak to a counselor about his many problems.

We have an aggressive EAP program here, in terms of psychological counseling. We have constant access to psychologists and we do lots of referral work. Our firm retains psychologists in a well-entrenched program that's been going on for 15 years. Everyone in the firm-management and labor both-has been trained to know about what we offer and everyone is well aware of it. We have posters everywhere and telephone hotlines for counseling, so nobody could ever say we haven't thought of our employees in terms of their EAP needs.

For the potentially dangerous employee who refuses to accept the fact that psychological counseling programs exist, and may in fact be a

necessity for him, a forced intervention by the employer may be the only hope. Could Robert Mack have changed his erratic attendance behavior if his supervisors had asked him to speak to a mental health counselor during his suspension? Could General Dynamics and a therapist have saved his career, and ultimately, those of James English and Michael Konz? We will never know.)

**SA:** How do you feel about what happened now? What thoughts go on now? Do you feel relieved, or regretful, or do you wish it hadn't happened, or wish you could turn back time?

**RM:** Everyday, the same incidents come to me in my mind. There's not a day that goes that it doesn't come to mind.

**SA:** Like flashbacks?

**RM:** Sometimes little flashbacks or trouble sleeping. I'm on medication now that makes me sleep.

**SA:** This is kind of a hard question to answer. If you had to do it over again, everything being the same, would you have chosen the same route or...?

**RM:** No. But then again, I was at the point where there was nothing left in my life.

**SA:** Right. So, your mindset was, I guess, you thought about killing yourself first and then everything just sort of happened after that, right?

**RM:** It happened after that.

(Steve attempts to seek solutions to these kinds of communication problems between employees and management):

**SA:** If you were the people at General Dynamics, what would you recommend that they do to avoid these kinds of problems in the future? I mean, if you could say, "I'm going to tell everybody what they need to know." What would that be?

**RM:** They'd have to change their ways. Change their ways towards terminations, change their ways towards talking and being with the people, change the old ways. It's always the company firing somebody. They never

fire anybody on an even keel, it's always [based] on a grudge or something there.

**SA:** You think that's because there's a big gap between labor and management?

**RM:** There's a big gap between labor and management.

**SA:** So, you think that the union people are upset at the management people and vice versa?

**RM:** Vice versa. There's a big gap in there. They need to come together and talk more to each other as individuals. Now in my case, there was no talking. There was no communication in my case.

**SA:** On two levels, right? The union people didn't help you and the management people didn't help you?

**RM:** The management didn't help me either. Management needs to talk more. See, if my general foreman would have known then it would have never gotten that far. But by him [English] trying to go around the general foreman...

**SA:** So do you feel like the management people don't respect the union policies? Like they're going to say, "Well, I'm not going to deal with that guy and they're gonna 'back door' him [seek to avoid union representation for the employee]?"

**RM:** That's very true. They don't respect the union policies at all. They always look for ways to get around them. And they use force, power, and anger to satisfy their own taste.

**SA:** Almost like a personal grudge?

**RM:** A personal grudge, yeah.

**SA:** Do you think James English had a grudge against you?

**RM:** I think he had a grudge against me.

(An August 1992 article in the local of the **San Diego Union-Tribune** discussed the witnesses' feelings of Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder in one of the witnesses to the Mack shootings. Mack comments on the piece):

**SA:** When you look at this piece, they talk about the fact that there are a lot of people who are sort of on your side. There are people at General Dynamics who claim, "I'm not going to say that he did the right thing, but I can understand where he came from, and maybe if I had been in his spot, I'd have done it, too." How can this be possible?

**RM:** That's right. There's that much tension in there.

**SA:** Do you think that it's all just people who work on the line, or is it people in management, too, or how do you think it's broken down?

**RM:** I think it's broken down to the people on the line, but then again, you must look at it like management has the same type of pressure we have put upon us. That's what makes management function in that particular way.

**SA:** It says here in the article, "Employees at the Lindbergh Field GD plant, however, have been open about their views and they are mixed. "There is a great deal of division within the plant," said [Mack shooting eyewitness Arnold] Castro. "There are people who are supportive of Mack and have been through the same frustration that Mack went through, and then there's a lot of people who feel it was a black issue." Do you think it was a racial thing because of English?

**RM:** It may have been a racial thing. At that time, I was too naïve to look back on it as racial. I'm black, OKAY. If there was something to spark English in his ways, or if his old ways come about inside of him, then he would pursue the avenue he pursued, because the union and management take things into their own hands on how to operate. If I didn't like you then I would find some way to terminate you. And that's how the company has its own forceful way of doing things. If they don't like what you do, they have a way of terminating you. It's been the old policy and the old system for the whole of my 25 years there. I've seen some guys get fired from General Dynamics for the way they walk or because of the way they talk. See what I'm saying? It's the way that the company have projected themselves all through this. Now, the time when people became aware of all this was when they started all the [employee] cutbacks. It used to be

one, two people got laid off and that would be all right. Now you're talking about thousands of people getting laid off.

**SA:** Right.

**RM:** Thousands of people losing their jobs and their homes, and stuff like that. This is where the pressure comes in.

(There is no evidence any of Mack's claims about "walking/talking" terminations are true. His frustration with management treatment is obvious. As indicated in the following, his anger is also directed toward a widely publicized event where a number of top executives at GD received performance bonuses coming on the heels of another round of announced layoffs.)

**SA:** When you read in the newspaper and see that [GD leader] William Anders makes millions of dollars in salary and bonuses, and then they have all these layoffs, I'm sure that aids fuel to the fire?

**RM:** Yeah, that adds fuel to the fire.

**SA:** Do people talk about that on the line?

**RM:** Yeah, they talk about that on the line. We can't get a nickel raise out of them but they [specially-compensated top GD executives] can make \$25 million [bonuses]. If that million dollars would float down through the system, it would make everyone a little more comfortable. That's management. That's the way the management operates.

**SA:** Do you think that it widens the gap between labor and management?

**RM:** Yeah. A lot of people were unhappy. A lot of people stood up and said they shouldn't have got those bonuses.

**SA:** How do you think you're perceived now by the people on the assembly line? Are you sort of a hero to them, or do they distance themselves from you?

**RM:** Some of them feel like that, "That's the man, that's the one that broke the camel's back. Now the pressure won't be on us as much." Because now they're [GD management] starting to change their ways.

**SA:** So in what ways do you think anything positive came from this, besides the fact that there may be some new ways and, like you say, “the pressure’s been taken off?” what positive might have come from all this?

**RM:** Well, there’s a lot of positive things that came out of it. It changed their ways they looked back and now they’re changing their policies. They’re going back and looking at them really strongly. But the company must know that their past history was rooted that way [with labor-management conflicts].

**SA:** Yeah?

**RM:** I’m sure that I’m not making any remarks for anyone to go out and do the same thing I did, but I’m sure that it’s going to continue happening. Because the people, just like the man down there, the postal worker that shot and killed that lady...

**SA:** The postal shooting incidents in Dana Point, California and also Dearborn, Michigan?

**RM:** These were things that you can look back and see that there were incidents where the company uses their old policy ways, which have been imbedded in them. It’ll take a lot to uproot those ways.

(Mack mentions the two post office shootings in Michigan and California that took place on the same day together. He also criticizes GD for placing his fate in the hands of a 25-year-old manager - Konz - who, in effect, was an infant when Mack began at the company. His perception-right or wrong-is that the company handled his case in an insensitive manner, using a young man whom Mack could not see as a work peer.)

**SA:** If you were put in a position just to make as many changes as you could at General Dynamics, what would you start with?

**RM:** I’d start with personnel and the way they treat people.

**SA:** Is the industrial relations department and the union under personnel?

**RM:** Yes. IR comes right up under personnel. Now I’m going to say this whether it’s in context or out of context. It’s just this one thought that I can never get out of my head. The union and the company knows what

they're going to do about 5 to 10 years ahead of time. They think that far ahead.

**SA:** Right, long-range planning.

**RM:** It was the fact that they put that young kid [Michael Konz] in there in a position to terminate people. For the flow of people who come through there, they put that young kid in there, knowing he's going to try and do his best job to be a "company man." But there should have been something in his mind that day that said, "Hey wait a minute, I'm only 25 years old. This man has worked here for 25 years. How can I terminate a man that's spent 25 years working here on the job, and I'm only 25 years old?"

**SA:** So you're saying that they failed to look at the larger picture of how things are? They didn't look at the big picture?

**RM:** He doesn't have any idea what work is. He's only been there for three years. William Anders is saying that we are going to have to slash so many thousands of people. Let's start herding them through here. Let's get as many through as we possibly can before something happens.

**SA:** If you look at the whole management/labor issue side by side, would you say that 80 percent of labor doesn't get along with management or is it 95 percent, or is it a smaller amount? Or is it that some people say, "I don't have a problem" or do you think that everyone at General Dynamics is irritated at the way the management is? I'm just trying to get a gauge on how the people feel...

**RM:** I would say maybe 70 or 75 percent of the people [don't get along with management].

**SA:** Do you think that the culture of General Dynamics- just the organization itself and how they treat everybody- has something wrong with it?

**RM:** There's something wrong with it.

**SA:** Even today?

**RM:** Even today. You see, the company can't change their ways. And like I say, it's right back to business again.

**SA:** Do you think that with the people- the management/labor split- things are going to get better or do both sides still have to give a little bit? Would that help? What's the best way to get them both to come together?

**RM:** If you've got old ways imbedded in you, it's going to be very hard to change them.

**SA:** But you couldn't say that goes for both sides?

**RM:** Yes that goes for both sides.

**SA:** Labor has its old ways, and management has its old ways?

**RM:** That's right.

(Mack discusses other workplace violence-related incidents at General Dynamics):

**SA:** What kind of problems have you seen at General Dynamics in terms of workplace violence? Have you seen guys punch their boss or have you seen sabotage or vandalism?

**RM:** There have been many cases of vandalism and there have been many fights with supervisors.

**SA:** Between supervisors and employees?

**RM:** Supervisors and employees.

**SA:** How about employee against employee?

**RM:** There have been some- employee against employee. One trying to beat the other out of something, or one getting more than the other got.

**SA:** So there's resentment?

**RM:** Yeah.

**SA:** Is it "employee hits boss" or "boss hits employee" or is it both?

**RM:** It's "employee hits boss."

**SA:** Because he's frustrated and feels like they're kicking him around?

**RM:** Right. Supervisors know not to put hands on you, but we don't know how angry we get until they inflict something upon us. Then our anger runs the temperature gauge. If it gets up too high, something's going to explode.

**SA:** Have you ever had any problems with a supervisor where you wanted to hit him or have you ever hit a supervisor?

**RM:** No.

**SA:** So prior to this, would you say you were a model employee?

**RM:** I was a model employee, in fact I was the best employee of my division in what I was doing.

**SA:** If you think about those incidents where a guy throws a punch at his supervisor, did he first exhibit certain signs that would have told the supervisor, "Hey, maybe I've got to back off. Or maybe I have to look at this guy a different way? Or maybe I have to do something that will bring everything down?"

**RM:** Right. It's mostly [signs of] frustration and anger.

**SA:** Which the supervisor should be able to read and doesn't or...?

**RM:** Well, in his old ways, he projected some type of discipline towards the individual, whether it was physical or mental.

**SA:** So, either formal or informal discipline?

**RM:** Yeah.

**SA:** But is there a way the supervisor could say, "Hey, I need to look at this guy, what signs he is giving off, so that he doesn't take a punch at me?" or "What signs is he giving off so that something worse could happen?"

**RM:** He's got to look at himself first. He's the one who is going to inflict the consequences. The person, the employee is gonna react; it's his natural reaction. If you start cussing at me, I'm going to cuss back at you. And by two people cussing, that leads to a level of misunderstanding. Now, you're at the level of violence. Then you're going up to where the [emotional] temperature changes on an individual and he strikes you.

**SA:** Right.

**RM:** Management can't see the things coming, but management can provoke those things that are coming.

**SA:** What if you looked at it the other way and flipped it over? Would you say that people on the job and in the labor force have a certain responsibility to the company? And they have a certain responsibility to themselves to be able to just do their job like you did up to the point?

**RM:** Right.

**SA:** And just say, "Well, this will all pass over me. I'm just going to hang tough and do my job." Do you think they have their own responsibility that way?

(This next passage fairly drips with irony. Mack admits that the company must terminate people who don't follow the work rules. And yet, he has spent much of the interview complaining that he was terminated for the same thing.)

**RM:** No, there's some people out there that do things. Management comes down with pressure to put on them. There's management's ways to put the pressure on them. So it's up to the supervisor to straighten that guy out. If you don't straighten him out, get rid of him.

**SA:** Okay.

**RM:** If a guy's doing something that he shouldn't be doing, it's like [the supervisor says], "OK now, if I catch you again, I'm going to fire you."

**SA:** So, you think it's okay for management to do their job, but they just have to make their policies clearer so that people can understand exactly what they can do and can't do and also what their rights are?

**RM:** The policy needs to be clear so that management and the people understand what the problem is or what the problems are.

**SA:** So when you look at it, is it because the policies and procedure manual is too complicated, and nobody ever sat down and explained it to you?

**RM:** Well, see in that case there, nobody sat down and explained the book to anybody.

**SA:** When you first got hired, did they expect you to sit down and read it by yourself?

**RM:** They expected you to read it by yourself. It's the same as the supervisors. They expect you to read it by yourself. Nobody sits down and helps you get the full extent of it.

(Mack points to what he sees as organizational culture problems at General Dynamics.)

**SA:** The supervisors they hire, do they mostly come from the line? People get promoted up from the line.

**RM:** People get promoted up from the line.

**SA:** When they get promoted up from the line, do they stay in the same place, or do they go somewhere else?

**RM:** They stay in the same place.

**SA:** So there's a tendency that people may think that the wrong guy got promoted or he feels like he got this new power and he's going to abuse his old friends and people he doesn't like?

**RM:** And abuse his old friends. They don't have friends then. They've got a policy there at General Dynamics where supervisors cannot eat with the employees.

**SA:** Why?

**RM:** They don't want them mingling.

**SA:** Do you think that's another example of the gap between the two, and that leads to the problems?

**RM:** That's another point where the gap is. They lose contact with people.

**SA:** The supervisors do?

**RM:** Supervisors do, because they're not able to mingle with the employees.

**SA:** And would you think that at the executive level it's even worse?

**RM:** Right.

**SA:** That they never come down to the assembly line?

**RM:** Right!

**SA:** They never have any idea what's going on?

**RM:** It's their rooted ways. And it's going to take a lot to get that root out.

(Mack discusses some of the symptoms exhibited by instigators of workplace violence.)

**SA:** Do you think that the supervisors need training in anything? Like a class that teaches them how to work with the people better, for better human relations? Or do they need some kind of training to teach them how people are in companies, and how to motivate them? Do you think that would help the employees at General Dynamics?

**RM:** That can help some employees. That can be a big plus, but they already have courses like that there that they go through.

**SA:** Do you think that it's a waste or...?

**RM:** It never sits because your own personal ways take over again.

**SA:** So, you can't train somebody that's been doing that for their whole career? Retrain them?

**RM:** You can't retrain them.

**SA:** I want to create classes for supervisors to go to help them understand what kind of problems you have. So that they can say, "Look, here are the warning signs this guy is giving us. Here are some things we can do to intervene at the lowest levels." So when Robert Mack's upset, we can step in and say, "Okay, Robert, let's go to this grievance hearing, or let's go do this..."

**RM:** Right.

**SA:** Or, "Why don't we get a cup of coffee and we'll talk about what the problem is." What I see is that companies let things escalate and they let them get to the highest level. So they can't intervene before it's too late.

**RM:** Right.

**SA:** So managers have got to figure out how to step in when an employee is upset or where he's exhibiting the kinds of signs that lead to these kinds of problems? But it seems like they don't know how to intervene.

**RM:** But when a supervisor chews out an employee, it's like cancer, it grows on him. And it grows on him until this employee can explode.

**SA:** If you were to look at other people, what kind of symptoms do they give off? What kind of signs? What physical signs do they see at work? If you were to watch some guy, you'd think, "Man, I bet he's going to hit the boss." What would you see?

**RM:** Well, you can see those emotions.

**SA:** He's upset, you can read it in his face right?

**RM:** Right. You can see those emotions in his face.

**SA:** He's upset, his face is red, he clenches his fist...

**RM:** His voice is stuttered, his balance is off, he curses, he doesn't look anyone in the eye. He mostly looks away from the boss and doesn't hear what the boss is saying. There are other symptoms where it can be that a person is quiet and not saying too much back to his boss. He's moody.

**SA:** So, when you were home during the three weeks, did you get a lot of those feelings yourself? Did you feel like you were brooding, and did you feel like things were building and building?

**RM:** Nothing was building, everything was exploding.

**SA:** Every day?

**RM:** Yeah, every day. Everything was exploding. The fire was exploding.

**SA:** The fire was big in your eyes?

**RM:** Yeah.

**SA:** You hadn't had any problems at General Dynamics with anybody? No punch outs or anything like that?

**RM:** No, no. I was a very happy person. I'm always smiling, happy, willing to help people. That was my job, to help people.

**SA:** Did you have any kind of other problems? You've never been arrested before?

**RM:** No, I've never been arrested.

**SA:** Were you having any personal problems that you think were related, or were affected by this, or was your home life OK and it was all related to work?

**RM:** Well, it affected my home life. And there were lies I had to keep putting out. I had to keep lying.

**SA:** To your fiancée?

**RM:** To my fiancée. Like I never told her I got terminated, that I was laid off, or even that I was going to be off a few days. There were lies that I had to tell each morning to cover up the days that I was off.

**SA:** Do you think that if you had talked to her more, things might have been different?

**RM:** Yeah, if I had talked more to her then they would have been different. She'd have been more understanding and probably would have been more supportive of me.

**END OF INTERVIEW**