

Interviewee: Jackson, Frank
Interview: February 23, 2007

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

Interview with: Mr. Frank Jackson
Interviewed by: Isaac Hampton II
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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola
Topic: NROTC, Blacks in Navy, Vietnam

IH: Today's date is February 23. I am at Prairie View A&M. I am interviewing Mr. Frank Jackson. Mr. Jackson, what is your date of birth?

FJ: July 25, 1951.



IH: And where are you from originally?

FJ: Luling, Texas.

IH: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up and how you made your way to Prairie View?

FJ: Yes, I grew up in a rural farming community of about 5,000 people - Luling, Texas. During the time I was a youngster, from 1951 to at least 1964, we lived in a segregated community. My father is from a settlement called Canoe Creek which is near (inaudible) _____, Texas, which is about 8 miles south of Luling, going towards Gonzales, Texas. My mother is from Kingsbury at a place called Seals Creek. And so,

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growing up in Luling, my father was a barber, self-employed all of his life. My mother was a beautician and she did short order work in cafes and also worked as a maid. So, we lived in a very low income household but we never found ourselves hungry or without clothes. They always provided for us. My mother and father worked hard. My two brothers and one sister. My sister did not live with us but just my two brothers, we grew up in the community of Luling on the other side of the tracks in a place they called the Flats. We had a pretty low income environment, a lot of beer joints - probably just as many beer joints as there were churches. We went to a black school, Rosenwald School that was created by the Rosenwald Foundation. As a matter of fact, they named it Rosenwald High School. We were integrated in 1964. There were 35 students in my class. When we graduated in 1969, 5 of that original 35 students graduated.

IH: When you came to Prairie View, can you tell me about your experience with the Navy ROTC program? What made you want to go Navy ROTC over Army ROTC?

FJ: Yes. I was one of those kids that was not supposed to go to college. I was supposed to go to the DeVry Institute of Technology up in Dallas at the time but about two weeks before school was to start, they asked for a tuition payment and about that time, about \$200 I think my father had to send in. But he did not have the money. So, I had to make some decisions on where I was going to go. Probably to the Army or Marine Corps, somewhere like that. But my mother had a sister that lived in Houston that said that she had a friend that knew somebody that could get me in Prairie View. And so, two weeks before Prairie View was to open, my mother drove me to Houston to

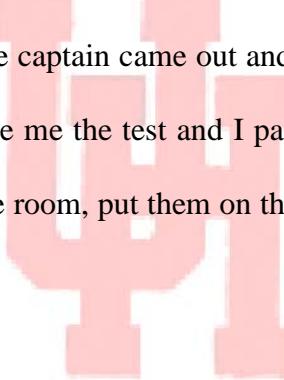
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her sister's house and then we went over to her sister's friend's house and the lady, Ms. Irma Williams, drove me to Prairie View and we talked to Mr. Walter Hall. And Walter Hall helped me and my mother fill out the necessary forms for me to get in Prairie View and also the financial aid papers. And that was the first time I realized that we were poor because Mama made less than \$3,000 a year, raising 3 sons. So, I qualified for mostly loans. They did not offer me any grants at that time, so I got all loans for the 4 years.

During my freshman year, I did not have a clue about NROTC or anything like that. They told us that all males had to take up one of the military sciences. The Navy had just started then. So, it did not make me any difference whether it was the Army or the Navy. I did not know. I was so far behind the cotton curtain at that time, I did not know how ignorant I was. But they asked me when I was a freshman, did I want to major in engineering. And the only engineers I knew were train drivers. So, I told them I did not want to drive a train. But Prairie View, they took care of me. They put me out in industrial education so I could learn how to weld and use my hands, get some skills. But during freshman week, I followed some students back from a dance. I was walking behind some male students going back to the board side of the campus, and a group of them broke off and went into Harrington Science Building. So, I thought maybe there was something else going on. So, I followed them over there. And it was the Navy that was giving a test. They had two tests going: one in auditorium A in Harrington Science and one in auditorium B. And I went into the one in B. I said, "What is going on?" They said, "We are going to give a test." It was for the Navy. They were selecting naval science students by testing them. And so, I took the test - I didn't care - and I failed the

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test. When I got back to my room, one of my roommates had also taken the test and he came in bragging about he was going to be in the Navy and the Navy had new uniforms and everything was real nice and not the Army, because everybody was in the Army by default. And so, that Monday morning . . . well, the next morning - I can't remember if it was Monday or not, but the next morning, I went over to the naval science building, to the third floor in Spence Hall and asked around. I told them I wanted to take the test that the other students took in auditorium A. And the gunnery sergeant laughed. He said, "Man, it is over. You can't do that." I said, "Well, I am not leaving from up here until I take that other test." So, I stayed up there and demanded I take that test. They thought it was kind of cocky. So, the marine captain came out and said, "Give him the damn test!" So, they took me down there, gave me the test and I passed the test." So, they gave me my uniform and I went back to the room, put them on the bed, and showed my roommate that, hey, I can do that, too.



So, I was a freshman. I don't know how many of us were in that class.

IH: What year was your freshman year?

FJ: It was 1969. And so, it was a little over 100 because they had it paired up pretty much 100 students passed it. So it was about a little over 100. I think I made like 101, 102. It was an odd number, in the class of freshmen. At the end of the spring semester, they were going to give out 5 scholarships, naval science scholarships to the freshman class. And so, a guy in front of me . . . I was number 6 in the class . . . he declined it

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because it required you going to summer cruise. And so, the dean said that he could not go because he had another internship somewhere else. So, by default, I got the scholarship. So, I got one of the 5 naval science scholarships which gave us \$50 a month, paid our tuition fees and bought our books. So, back then, that was a good help. So, I was real excited. I called my mother and told her about it. That was the first scholarship I had ever gotten. So, she was real excited. And so, at the end of my freshman year, the class had been culled down to 15. We went from 100 to 15 students. They took 15 of us to Corpus for one week of training. No, it was 2 weeks of military training. And we stayed in the barracks, we drilled every day, we did PT, and we bonded pretty good, the 15. I think we may have lost one brother, so it was quilled down to 14. And then, the 5 of us went on summer cruise. That was my first time to fly on an airplane, a commercial airplane. I had never been on a commercial airplane before. So, that was an experience. Got to San Diego that night. I almost got a ticket for jay walking because I had never been in a city by myself before. So, that was an experience. I stayed at the YMCA and left my orders in the room. It was crazy. But they had a bus out there that took us to the base on 32nd Street there in San Diego. And I went aboard the U.S.S. Hole DDG13. That was my first ship. And me and Robert Dean were the two students on that ship.

And so, we went through our midshipman training. The day we got underway, there were several ships and the taskforce of midshipman, because they had midshipmen from all over the country. And, of course, the 5 black ones from Prairie View. We kind of stood out a little bit. But Robert Dean was taken down to jack staff which holds the (inaudible) _____ on the fan tail. Somebody pulled the cotter pin too quick and the jack

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staff failed and crushed his small finger, the tip of it, and I believe it broke it because it mashed it pretty hard. And so, he was jumping up and down. I grabbed him before he went over the side. We took him down to sick bay and they gave him medication. So, for the first couple of days at sea, he could not stand his watches, so I stood his watches for him. And then, his finger started to turn purple and black. And so, I went to the executive officer and asked him to get Robert Dean off the ship because it was clear that his finger was not going to improve. They said, "Well, we are going into San Francisco. We have plenty enough time." But Robert Dean could not stand anybody to walk by his rack because it was just hurting him so bad. So, me and the XO got into it. And so, I stood these watches and did everything, but I was kind of pissed off at the ship. And so, I figured they were going to kick me out by the end of that cruise because I was raising all kind of hell. But I did what they asked me to do. I stood my watches. The only thing I would not do, I would not go in the bilges under the (inaudible) _____ and chip paint. Some of the snipes down in the engine room (inaudible) _____ punish the midshipmen and they told us to go in the hole under a (inaudible) _____ that they had taken off line and chips of pain in a hole that you never see. And I told them I wasn't going to do that and I didn't do it. So, they reported me to the XO. I told him, "I am not going in there." So, he sent me up to the missile tech, so I started hanging out with them. And that was a good experience. Long story short. We got to San Francisco. Robert Dean was medivac'd off the ship and the tip of his finger had to be amputated. And still today, he still has that amputation. You can see it on his finger.

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We went to San Francisco. Then we went to Tacoma, Washington, which was a good experience. Then all of us in the taskforce went out to Hawaii. So, that was my first time to Hawaii. So, that was exciting. Coming from Luling, Texas, going to Hawaii my freshman year at Prairie View, that was a big experience for me. Nobody believed I did that, you know. When I went back home, nobody believed I had been to Hawaii. All the boys at home thought I was lying. "You haven't been to Hawaii!" I said, "Yes." But it was good. I brought a lot of gifts back, took a lot of pictures in Waikiki, of course. But that Hawaiian experience was something else because the midshipmen that came from ROTC units were there at the Oak Club when the ship from the naval academy came in, and those kids were real rowdy, and they looked down on us but we did not pay them any attention. We just kind of stayed clear of them. But they thought they were better than us, being ROTC. So, while we were in the Officers Club having lunch, they decided to take all of our covers and all of our belongings that we had stored in the cubby hole right there at the entrance to the Officers Club and throw them in Pearl Harbor - just threw them in the damn bay. So, we came out looking for our caps and our bags. I had a little bag I had bought, swimming trunks and all the other stuff that we were doing on liberty because you had to wear a uniform on liberty. And we could not find our stuff. And we went out there - it was floating in the damn harbor. And so, needless to say, we were ready to fight. So, you know, they broke us up because black, white, all the NROTC (inaudible) ____ the naval academy's party. You know, we were just getting ready to have a war up in there. And so, they stopped us at the door and told us to go back to the ship, that they would discipline those kids. They were all in their laughing. It was big

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fun to them. But we lost all our covers and everything because we could not retrieve them. They had sunk.

IH: Those were the ones from Annapolis?

FJ: Annapolis. Yes, they had their own ship, you know, so there were just tons of them that came in there on their (inaudible) _____ cruise and we had 5 ships in there with our taskforce. So, they thought it was big fun. Everybody laughed about it. But we came back to San Diego and I came on home. That was a good experience.

Prairie View gave me some very good first experiences in life, being part of the Naval ROTC program. The second year, those of us on scholarship went to the Marines. We spent one week in Corpus with the Marine Corps guiding us but we had a chance to fly all the aircraft that the Navy had to offer, from helos to jets. They let us fly in the rear seat of F4 Phantom. I think it was F4. Phantom jets. So, we had a chance to drive. It was fun. It was a big experience. P3. We did it all. And then, they took us out to Camp Pendleton where we spent another week with the Marines. So, we did amphibious operations and I realized then I did not want to be a Marine. That was not the life I wanted. (Inaudible) _____ down in here with a backpack digging in dirt that was hard as concrete, trying to dig a foxhole to sleep in at night and eating K ration. That was not my idea. And then, when we did the amphibious assault, sitting in that Amtrak was like sitting in a sardine camp with an M16 between your legs bumping metal helmet against metal. That was not fun. And then, when they opened up the track, you stepped out of

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the track thinking you were going to have a bottom and there was no bottom under your feet, so you sink. And then, somebody else pulls you up. And you say, oh, this is crazy - I am a sitting duck, coming in from this beat. This is not the way to do it. So, I learned then. So, when I came back, from that second class cruise, we had to make a decision whether or not we wanted to be Marine or Navy. I told them Marines, you know, that is it. But they were pissed because they thought I was going to be a Marine since they thought I had a lot of (inaudible) _____. They said, "You are going to be" . . . I said, "No, that is not for me." I did not like that. I did not see myself dying that quick. It just wasn't the life.

So, I came back to Prairie View, I chose Navy. So, I took navigation, ship handling the next year and then I went on my first class cruise that summer. This time, again, it was only the scholarship students and I was sent to Travis Air Force Base and from there, we would buy a lottery and they assigned us to ships. I got assigned to the U.S.S. Ticonderoga. It was out of Sasebo, Japan. So, I got a chance to fly to Alaska and then they flew us over to Sasebo. And we picked up the ship, and then we went to Philippines and back to Japan, back to Philippines and then they got a mission to pick up one of the Apollo spacecraft. I forget which one it was. They had to go retrieve the capsule because back then, you know, they would drop them in the ocean. So, the (inaudible)_____ was dispatched to go down there. So, they offloaded the midshipmen in Yokosuka. And so, we stayed at Yokosuka about 5 days. And so, they had to find something for us to do for 5 days. And so, they sent us to the USO and they hooked us up with tour. So, I toured Nagasaki, Iwojima, and we went by bus, so we got to see the

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Japanese countryside and the little kids holding hands, getting on the bus. So, it was a cultural experience and a lot of those young kids had never seen a black person up front. So, on the bus, they would come by and touch my hair and rub my skin.

I guess one of the most moving experiences was when we went to Hiroshima and went to the monument that they had for the atom bomb and to see the devastation that that bomb did. And people were still crying in that museum. They were coming in there just crying. So, me and this other white guy that was with us, you know, we felt uncomfortable being Americans. We knew we had no business up in there. That was not the place to be. He was like, "Come on, Frank." I said, "No. Coming up in the south, I know when it is time to exit." He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "No, it is time to go. These folks are crying. They don't like us. Can't you tell? It is time to" . . . So, we took pictures and did all . . . we exited and got back on the bus and came on back. But it was a very moving experience to see how devastating that bomb was. It was not a nice thing. Then, we came on back to the States. So, the Navy, just starting off, was a very good experience here at Prairie View for me.

IH: Let me ask you this. With the experience of graduating from an HBCU, did you feel that coming from, again, a traditional HBCU gave you something or instilled something in your character that an OCS program or . . . do you feel that you gained something from graduating from PV, again, a traditional HBCU that you could not have gained from, let's say, an OCS program or a traditionally white program?

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FJ: Yes, because Naval ROTC at Prairie View was a big thing and the ROTC period was a big thing back when I was here. Since it was mandatory, just about every male student except for veterans and those that had done their mandatory 2 years were involved in the program. So, it was an atmosphere almost like a military academy. You know, people took pride in wearing their uniforms. When other universities were being shamed for being in the riots and because of their anti-war attitude, you know, at Prairie View, it was a big deal. And upper classman would dress you down if you were a freshman or sophomore and you did not have your uniform on correctly. It was a good experience. It was the first time I had to shave, you know, and I know I had peach fuzz. But, you know, they made you shave and do a lot, so it was a growing up experience, too. You had to shine your shoes, you had to polish your brass, and the girls, you know, that was very special with Prairie View. The girls made it special because they liked the guys in uniform. And so, going into the dining hall on Thursdays after drill was a big deal, to be sharp, a sharp uniform. It was good. So, Prairie View, it fit in to the cultural environment at Prairie View because there were very few things that we had to say were special events but Thursday drill was one of those special events just like the stomp shows and all that. The drill on Thursday was a special event because whoever finished their drill period first, Army or Navy, you would fall out into the main street of the university and march around the campus. So, it was good. You would see, the whole road would be filled with Army and Navy midshipmen and cadets. And people would come to the sidewalk and watch us pass by. The Army had the purge and rifle drill team and they were a precision drill team. They always put on nice shows, so people liked that. It was an event. Thursdays became an event, you know, for Prairie View's campus.

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And I took a lot of pride in it. So, yes, I got a lot of pride out of being here at HBCU, especially during an era when it was not popular nationwide at the universities to really be a part of the ROTC. Prairie View, I do not think, went through that phase as much as other schools did.

IH: O.K. Now, getting to you had a lot of pride and esprit des corps happening, let me ask you concerning masculinity, did this Prairie View give you a sense of attaining your manhood or getting like a rite of passage or anything like that?

FJ: Yes, you know, coming to Prairie View, I already had a good sense of my maleness and myself so, you know, that never was, I do not think, a major issue. But coming to Prairie View, it was a rite of passage, I think for the girls and the guys. It was a growing up, because you had the same pressures that we experienced in small towns and you had choices to make, whether to be involved in the good side of life or the bad side of life. It was there, and in a very contained environment. So, you know, we all had to make choices in college. And some of us made good choices, and some of us did not make good choices. But yes, Prairie View provided that opportunity in an environment where it was understandable; you could understand the choices you were making. It was not like you got tricked into something or got caught off guard, but you had the chance to observe it, watch it, and then say, O.K., this is what I choose to do or not choose to do -- whether it was dealing with brothers that may be over here drinking or brothers may be experimenting with drugs or whatever, you could see that stuff unfolding in front of you and you were close enough to it, you knew the people. I mean, it was not like that

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stranger on the corner. But you could see whether or not it helped them in their classes, did it have a bad end, everybody's word quickly spread that somebody got busted or something like that. So, you said, well, this is not what I want to do. You could make those choices because it was up close and personal.

IH: Sort of like a sense of accountability?

FJ: Yes, it was right there, right there in your face.

IH: This was in the midst of the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. As a person being in uniform and the Vietnam War going on around you, did you ever have controversial feelings concerning, hey, I am serving in the military, we have this war going on that is unpopular, and there is a possibility I can fight for the country, however, as an African American, we still have not secured all the civil rights that we deserve, however, I might have to put my life on the line? Can you talk about those feelings that you had then and how you rationalized it?

FJ: Yes, we had those feelings, you know, because during the Black Power Movement, the questions were always put forth: you know, you were willing to die for a country that is not treating you fairly. How do you feel about it? Well, as a young person, first, you may take a radical position, you know, damn the United States, I am not going to die for them, these white folks, you know. And then, you start to think, you say, wait a minute, I live here, my mother lives here, my brothers and my sister live here.

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What about them? Are they moving anywhere? Are they going anywhere? So, reality slowly starts to pull you back from that far left position, back to a center position to where you say, wait a minute, you know, the United States is me, too, regardless how I feel about them. I have got to protect this thing because right now, I am not going anywhere. I have no choice. So, we started to settle in. And at that time, we were just learning about Africa. So, that African experience was something new in the sense that we were identifying with it but we did not know. We did not know, say, if you all packed up tomorrow and went to Africa, what are you going to do? What kind of life was there? We had seen movies and stuff but we did not know Africa, we did not know the lifestyle, the language, the people, so what we knew was Luling, Texas, Prairie View, Texas, and right now, that is square dab in the middle of the United States. And so, the choice became easy, you know, heaven here. And I might as well saddle up and come on and protect this until we can change it for the better. And then, that message started to resonate, that we have got to be a force for change. And so, going into the military, we knew we could not change it overnight by ourselves but at least incrementally, we could start being positive forces for change. And so, we started to understand our mission because we knew right off that we were a minority, a very strong minority, especially being black naval officers. I think back then, we were less than 2% of the total officer corps in the Navy. So, you were like a deep minority. But everything you did mattered. And so, you know, you had to try, to the best of your ability, to keep yourself clean, keep yourself above reproach, even though we were just as tempted as anybody else with the life activities that were going on around us. There was always a very fine line you had to

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walk in order to try to protect yourself because, you know, it just was not you anymore.

It was beyond you.

IH: What year did you go to active duty?

FJ: 1973.

IH: So, you were the second or third class . . .

FJ: I was the second freshman class that went the full 4 years. So, the class in front of us started when they started the program and we came that following year. So, we were the second freshmen class to go the full 4 years in ROTC program.

IH: What was the first ship that you were on?

FJ: It was the U.S.S. Hole, DDG 13.

IH: Can you talk just a minute about, you said that when you first arrived on that ship, about your replacement, the radical Black Power officer?

FJ: Oh, my first ship I went on active duty was the U.S.S. Longbeach, CGN9 and yes, going aboard Longbeach, it was an awesome ship, to say the least, being a cruiser. There were very few cruisers out there. And then, a nuclear power cruiser at that, made it

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special. It was armed with the latest weaponry. And so, going aboard was . . . it was not intimidating, it was a big challenge I thought. I never was intimidated by Longbeach but I was just challenged to learn it and that was the effort. But after being on board for a while, maybe a year or two, you know, you realize that the blacks on board were going through a whole special crisis in identity, in finding themselves and making rank, advancing, because there was still over-discrimination in the Navy. I mean, you could be called a nigger. It may pop out. So you had to deal with that craziness. And you saw discrimination in evaluations. You know, I am not still not a big fan of evaluations systems today because, you know, we had to do it constantly in the military. You were constantly, almost every 6 months, being evaluated. So, if you really wanted to get a person, you know, it was easy, especially from a management approach. You know, you would just start popping them in the evals. You just pop them and after a couple of times up to bat, you know, you got justification to hammer that person, either push them out. And so, being in management, middle management as a junior officer, you start to see how, you know, you could really break a person, abuse a person institutionally. So, institutional racism became clear just from learning the management system. So, you know, I became acutely aware of that and so, I started to do things to try to change that in my own way. But the brothers were telling me that there was a young black guy that I believe was from UCLA that came aboard before I did and that he was more radical in his ideas, far more radical than I was. You know, I am a country boy. I knew Black Power but I guess the boys from UCLA had been exposed to more radical teachings and stuff. I had seen Angela Davis and I think we went down to University of Houston to hear her lecture but Angela Davis was the first time that I had seen a black intellectual or

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any intellectual and understood what I was looking at. I mean, it was like, damn, the sister is deep! She left me about 15 times during her lecture. I stayed with her for a minute, then she would skip and go to another plan and you would say, oh man! Me and my friends were sitting there like damn, this sister! And you could tell from the audience that some of the people were following her but she had left a lot of people cold in their tracks. And at Prairie View, we had good instructors and there were intellectuals here but they never approached us on that level, you know, because probably we could not understand them. So, we were not exposed to them and we did not have the battery of lecturers and guest speakers to come through the university, say, like, you would get at UCLA. So, you know, this brother probably came there more armed mentally with ideas, with notions of how to change the world than we had even thought of. So, when I went aboard Longbeach, this brother had already been there and he had organized the brothers into a general quarter station so in case there was a riot or in case something would happen, they were prepared to take over the ship. That in itself was crazy but it happened. So, we had to deal with that and I think as a result, you know, he was asked to resign his commission because, again, he had met with the brothers and one of the brothers was an undercover agent, and they turned him in. So, you know, that was dangerous.

IH: What year was that? Was that 1973 as well?

FJ: Yes, it was about 1973, 1974.

IH: Do you remember what month that might have been? Summertime?

FJ: I cannot recall. We were still in San Diego.

