UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Captain Paul James Matthews
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IH: The date is 3/14/07. I am in Houston, Texas, at the Buffalo Soldiers Museum. I am doing an interview with Captain Matthews. Mr. Matthews, what is your full name?

PJM: Paul John Matthews.

IH: What is your date of birth?

PJM: January 1945.

IH: And where are you from originally?

PJM: Lamarque, Texas.

IH: Can you tell me a little bit about your experience at the PV ROTC program and kind of how you wound up there?

PJM: Well, I have always, when I was in high school, wanted to be an officer in the military. I initially was planning on going into the military academy at West Point. I actually got a recommendation from the state senator at the time from Galveston but for a lot of reasons, did not make it to West Point. I ended up at Prairie View. In fact, that was a blessing because at the time, I needed (inaudible) _____ and direction and I got that at Prairie View because it is a historically black college and you have got to remember the times, the 1960s. The whole neighborhood, everybody, had a single mission, single focus for the kids in the area and that was their education. And places like Prairie View were ideally suited for that particular mission.

IH: What class did you graduate with?

PJM: Prairie View, January 1968.

IH: O.K., again, during the 1960s at Prairie View, did your instructors give you any type of advice or training on joining a predominantly white military where black officers were so few?

PJM: No, not really because you have to remember that Prairie View was an institution that had an ROTC program and a part of that mission was to produce officers for the military. So, they would have been advocates of the military system, not necessarily all of the policies but a part of changing the policy was the infusion of black officers and where were the officers coming from? They were coming from the ROTC program.

IH: Going from an HBCU to, again, into a white military, did you experience any type of racism upon leaving Prairie View and was going to the military your first major experience, dealing with whites on an everyday basis?

PJM: Yes, you have to remember - I am a product of the 1960s. Born in the 1940s. And grew up in a segregated environment. I went to an all black elementary school, junior high and high school. In the small town that I am from, you know, blacks stayed on their side of the town and whites stayed on the other. So, you know, I was in a segregated situation. And when I entered the military, you go into the military and the military basically is a microcosm of the rest of America. And so, going through the day-to-day activities, you know, it is military. You had policies, procedures, and you did not really have an environment where you were ran across segregation or discrimination. Those things occurred after hours, off post, and that is when you would experience it. But most people that I knew that were black, they went to certain places and whites went to different places. But on post, you know, it was basically an integrated environment. The military, as I see it, was actually on the vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement. I do not think they did it because they wanted to. I think they did it because of necessity. And it even goes back to 1948 when President Truman integrated the Army with Executive Order 9981. That really did not occur until the Korean conflict. And so, they were forced to do it. They had to make some changes. I think they did, they moved forward with it. And so, you have got to remember, in the military, it is all about the mission, it is all about the unit, especially when you are talking about in a combat

situation. In a combat situation, like when we were in Vietnam, it was not about your political position, it was not about the president or the vice-president or any of those kinds of things, it was about how do we help the soldier on the left, how can I help the soldier on the right because those soldiers are going to help me to get back. So, it was all about the unit. There was pride in the unit. You did not say, I was a black soldier from the first the fifth, you would say I am a soldier from the first to the fifth, you know? You were the big rigs 1, you were in the 101st Airborne. You did not say, wow, yes, I am the black squad leader from the 101st Airborne. No, I am a leader from the 101st Airborne Division. So, that is the difference, the difference in being in the military, being in the combat situation, or being in the military and being on a base camp somewhere else back here in America. It is a totally different environment.

IH: You mentioned the Civil Rights Movement. Going into 1968 when you came out of PV that was kind of during the upswing of the Black Power Movement. What were your feelings and ideas about what was going on then? When you saw these guys like Huey P. Newton with the redderick that they were spewing out, I mean, how did that make you feel?

PJM: I am proud of the Civil Rights Movement. I was a student. I was a part of it, I mean, so a lot of the things that were going on in other parts of the country, were going on to a smaller degree on the campus of Prairie View. We would come to Houston. They had demonstrations in this place. I mean I can recall getting the bus from Prairie View to Houston and had to stop to get a hamburger 40 miles outside of Houston and we

had to go through the back door to get a hamburger. That was like 2 months away from going to Vietnam. (Inaudible) _____ but I was in America at the time, you know? I thought that the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, could only go forward if you had individuals coming out of the schools that would participate in the program and in the process to move it forward. And I got that from the Buffalo soldier. Actually, that was when I made a decision to be a part of the military - the 1860s and the 1960s - there are many parallels that can be drawn and what these black soldiers did in the 1860s was not necessarily for themselves but for those that came behind them. They became a part of the system. They were internal. They worked and did what they needed to do and, you know, with that, helped those that came after them, people like myself. And so, I said, hey, you know why am I only thinking about me when I should be thinking about those that will come behind me? How can I change the system by not being a part of the system? And so, yes, that is when I went on, went on in. I served one year in San Antonio (inaudible) _____, one year in Vietnam. Actually, was planning on staying but, you know, I changed my mind after 11 months and 29 days in Vietnam. But I think that the fundamentals of honor and valor and courage and the things that these black soldiers in the 1860s stood for, that is what I took away and that is what I brought with me and, you know, one of the reasons why I started this museum is to make sure that kids -- black, white, brown, (inaudible)_____, it does not matter -- when they come through here, they understand and appreciate the contributions of the Buffalo Soldiers and help build within them a spirit of patriotism.

IH: During the 1960s, still staying on the theme of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement, between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. King, which one do you feel blacks most identified with in the 1960s?

PJM: Oh, I do not know. I did not do a prospective, randomized study, so I really do not know who had the most people behind him. I think it had to do with the environment that you were in. I think the vast majority of middle class blacks had a tendency to lean towards Martin Luther King. Why? Because that is their background, that is what they were doing. Middle class black had jobs; they were more likely to want to be a part of the system, to move within the system to work in corporations and those kinds of things. I think if you were younger, a student, without a job, that could be a tendency to move more towards the more militant aspect of things which would be the Black Panther parties, Malcolm X and all of these types of opportunities. I think it had to do with your environment. And I think a person could move from one to the other just based on where you were at that particular time. But I do not really think that it was a conflict of being either one or the other. I think there is more than one way to come about with a solution. I think the one fed on the other. You always need someone to be an agitator. In good times, you always need someone who is going to say, hey, let me take another look at this or hey, (inaudible)_____ and you always need someone that is going to be a compromiser and say, O.K., we can work this out. So, I think that even in 2007, you know, the same thing goes on. I would say that we need some change and we need it now and the others would say that we have made some changes and let's go along with the system. (Inaudible) _____ is a good example. There are many folks out there

now that say that still they are a necessary part of America and then there are others that are saying that, hey, you have been paid. So, there is always a difference of opinion on how you move forward a particular initiative. The thing that I think we have problems with, we need in the black community that we do not have is a single mission anymore. We do not have a single objective. In my era, in the 1960s, we had a single objective and that was education. Everybody pointed towards education. Everybody told you -- the pastor, the principal, the teacher, your cousin Pete, Aunt Sadie -- "Boy, go get an education." But I do not think we have that now. We have the hip-hop generation, we have entrepreneurs, we have people, black folks, young males dropping out. The numbers are (inaudible) _____ more black males in a particular age group in prison than they are in school. Those kinds of things. I think that is where we need to focus on and saying how can this community, this black community, deal with or develop a single agenda? And I think there are individuals out there trying to do that, you know, but I do not think we are unified as to how we move forward with a single agenda.

IH: You mentioned the Buffalo Soldiers were a big influence on you and for them, coming up as a young man going into PV, what were some of the things that you found that represented masculinity as a man of color coming up? Some people have mentioned figures such as Mohammad Ali, Jim Brown, Huey Newton, Thurgood Marshall, Tommy Smith. Was there any individual or organization that represented that to you, like coming up, like, yes, this is the rite of passage of what a man represents?

JPM: Not really. I came out of an environment . . . well, I had my father and he had 7 brothers. They all were professional men. None of them went to finish high school but they were plumbers, they were painters, they were carpenters, they were electricians. So, they had professions that they built trades. These were . . . the Matthews men, we had a strong - we still are, a strong family. My dad used to say all the time, "Boy, you are a Matthews. Why are you doing this silly stuff? Why are you doing this? Why did you get into that?" So, I really did not need any outside influences because of the strong family ties that we had. I mean, it was not until I had gotten a job and moved to a different town with a company that I had to go out and meet new people, you know, because we had our family get-togethers. So, I think that other than the fraternities and the clubs and things that I got into in college, did I look to other individuals for some type of masculine mentoring, it all came through the family and I thank the Lord for that because I know there are a lot of other families that did not have that type of environment. But my dad . . . there were 8 of us in the family. He was a carpenter, a contractor; he built homes for all of us. He sent all of us to school that wanted to go. And all of his brothers helped to build the house that we had. So, I did not necessarily need mentors in that area. I think the images that you had out there, I think the Black Panther Party wanted to have a different image. They all represented something that was strong, virile that could be seen, with the clenched fist, the Afro, the leather jacket, this is my turf and we are going to stand up for it. We are going to live or die right here. That was an area if I was very . . . it demonstrated the American way. America did not like it but it was basically the American way of taking over. That is how we got to be America. They were doing that in their own area.

IH: Bringing us up to the time that you were in Vietnam, what unit were you with, or units were you with?

JPM: I was with the 1st and the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division. It was a medical company attached to the 5th Division. We were in Quang Tri in Dong Ha _____ basically in I Corps near the DMZ.

IH: And do you think the United States should have been in Vietnam after you spent some time there and saw what was going on?

JPM: I did not have any opinion one way or the other. Being an historian, I know where it all came from. I mean, America then with Southeast Asia, since the 1940s, Eisenhower in the 1950s. The French left. Kennedy. It started escalating from there. So, American politics getting involved with foreign positions. To me, it is neither here nor there. I was there not because of politics; I was there because I was a military. I took an oath to defend the country against all enemies, foreign and domestic. It just happened that the U.S. government had identified North Vietnam as the enemy. So, I mean, I was basically there fulfilling my mission, my promise, to stand up for America and had very little political implications. It was not until I got back and out that I made any serious thought about any political positions. It was necessarily because of where I was, it was because of the other individuals that I was involved with that I was serving because I would get questions from them - why? And you have to remember that Vietnam was a

very unpopular war. Blacks have always gone into the military. In fact, from the Civil War, it was an avenue out of (inaudible) _____ conditions. I can recall my father came back from World War II and family and friends, people would stand out, people would recognize them. The military was something very positive. It was not until Vietnam when the military started representing something other than being great in the black community.

IH: In Vietnam, can you talk a little bit about your commanders, NCOs, your relationship with them?

PJM: I was an officer so I had followed a little different (inaudible) _____ enlisted rank. The officers were all educated individuals and we had specific missions. I had all types of soldiers reporting to me - black, white, brown, etc. Our NCO, the first sergeant, was a black man. And we were in (inaudible) _____. And now, we had a base camp. So, I think that we did not experience a lot of problems or issues that they may have experienced in some other places because, you know, you had wounded coming in, you were always busy taking care of folks.

So, I mean, I just did not have a lot of problems other than one major incident where there was an argument between a black soldier and a white soldier and the white soldier was killed. This black soldier shot him with an M16. Well, they had an argument playing volleyball or something. That was a very tragic situation. And when it happened, I was in my hooch (sp?), my living quarters. I heard the M16 go off. I

thought it was the enemy in our camp because I heard people running down the PSP, the perforated steel plate that they make the sidewalks from. And then, one of the soldiers pulled open the door, pulled back the canvas, that was the door, that I lived in, and said, "Lieutenant, we need you." And so, I got up and he was telling me that the soldier had been killed, shot. They did not know if he was dead. I got down there like 2 or 3 minutes later to where it occurred and immediately went back to get the doctor who lived in the next tent over from me. And then, when I ran back down to get the doctor and I pulled this door open, he immediately spun around and had his 45 pointing right at me. I could have been a goner right there. He saw it was me, put the 45 down, and I was telling him what was going on. And so, we went back and he did what he needed to do but the soldier was gone. And the thing about it is I had to write up a report on that. I never found out what happened to the soldier that killed him. That was one of the things . . . the job that I hated most in Vietnam was the grave registration. That is the thing that turned me against being in the military. The grave registration officer. And I was only there for a couple of months because you could only take it for a few months at a time. I had to identify and write letters back to the U.S. of the soldier that had been killed in the outfit. And it was basically a form letter, you know? And to be there with the body and the smell, even today, the smell is still there. That would turn anybody against war. Most soldiers, especially career soldiers, they do not like war. I mean, soldiers do not like war. I don't know where the rumor started that soldiers were looking for war. They are not. That is the last thing you want. I mean, you are looking for peace because if you ever get around or (inaudible) _____, you do not want to do that. That is the last thing you want.

IH: So, that was your major experience of racial tension?

PJM: That was an extreme case. But everything was basically simple. I mean, we did not have a lot of racial tension. I think that that happens way back in base camps that are removed from the front lines. We were in a hospital situation so it is a little different. But I think that at the large base camps or R&R sites, you would have more racial tension because there is a tendency to go back to stateside opinions and back into areas where you are most comfortable. Then you have alcohol and all those kind of other things. That is where you get a lot of racial tension. But on the combat field, I do not think you get that.

IH: O.K. Concerning promotion in the officer corps with the OERs and things like that, did you feel that the promotion system was objective and fair?

PJM: For lieutenant and captain, it was almost automatic. That was my only experience. I moved in 12 months from a second lieutenant to a first lieutenant and I made that in Vietnam, and then on to captain. So, it was like more to do with your time than with getting a negative OER because I think if you get above field grade, I think that is when you have a lot of issues. But here again, you have got to remember, the Army is basically a microcosm of Americans. So, the people that are officers and enlisted men and NCOs in the Army are people that came out of America. So, the same issues, same problems, the same biases that you have when you were growing up in a small town in

Texas, as the same biases and opinions you are going to have if you were an officer or NCO in the military. So, I guess it is nothing really different. I think you learn and you grow. So, I had very little contact with white folks. White folks had very little contact with me outside of the military. But my first sergeant, when I first went in, was a white guy. He taught me a lot. Before I left Prairie View, my mentor there said, "Hey, you go find out who the first sergeant is and you go talk to him. You let him know that you are a new lieutenant and you want him to help you." And that is exactly what I did. He did not tell me, hey, if he is white, do this, if he is black, do that. He said, hey, your first sergeant. And so, that is exactly what I did. I did well in the military because of the white first sergeant. But I think that you have individuals in the military that have particular biases, particular prejudices, and so that is going to come out. But I do not think it was widespread. I do not think it was a conspiracy. I do not think it was something that the military said, hey, this is what we are going to do to black people - we are going to keep them down. I think it was the individuals that made it up. And if the officers in charge did not catch it or were not cognizant of the issue, then I think you had problems. And I think you have that today. Not just in the military but you have it in corporate America.

IH: Did you have a particular mentor besides your first sergeant, a senior black officer from another unit?

PJM: Prairie View is well-known for officers and there were a couple of individuals that graduated ahead of me that were mentors or people who told me to do this and do

that. It was always helpful to have a mentor although I was wild at the time, did not listen all the time. But one guy at Stonehill Green, a big guy, about 6'5", he cornered me one day on the parade field and chewed me out. He was not even my commanding officer. He was just somebody I knew from Prairie View. But I was not doing what I was supposed to do. He told me, "Hey man, you are a Prairie View graduate. You can do better." That helped. There was a gentleman called Blackjack Wallace, he was a lieutenant colonel - a black guy. He helped me through a presentation that I was putting together. He came in and saw it - he told me afterwards, "Lieutenant, I know you can do better than that," and I did. I went home that evening and put together a presentation. That next afternoon, gave the same presentation, came back, and they gave me a standing ovation. It must have been like 30 years later, I was working in the Medical Center and was talking to a gentleman about the Army. He said he had to move to a retirement community and there was a gentleman named Blackjack Wallace who was there. And that was the guy. That was the guy! I said, "Man, I know that guy! He helped me out many years ago when I was a young lieutenant."

IH: This is the last question. What do you feel that people need to know about African Americans' military service during the Vietnam era that has not been told or written about?

PJM: I think that what people do not know is the number of blacks that served in the specialty units, like the Special Forces, the Green Berets, the (inaudible) LRRP units. Probably one-third of individuals that were parts of these units were minority. I do not

think people know that, you know? They were volunteers. Even though there were individuals stateside that were fighting against the war and Vietnam, you had dedicated black men and women that were saying, hey, I am going to stand up for America even though America is not standing up for the black people. And doesn't that ring a bell to you? That is the same thing the Buffalo Soldiers did, you know? So, it is an amazing thing, you know? The 1860s and the 1960s. And they had to fight. You know, in World War II, you had to give up your rank to be in a combat unit. They wanted blacks to be in service units. Blacks did not want to be in the service units. They wanted to demonstrate their patriotism. They wanted to demonstrate that they would stand up and fight for America. So, it is kind of ironic in a sense that nowadays, hey, you say don't put me in no combat unit, put me in a service unit. It is rather ironic how things and times have changed from where they were in the 1860s, where they were in the 1960s, and where they are now. But the bottom line is irrespective of your political position, it is still America and the only way you are going to change it is you have got to get involved and you have got to make the changes. You cannot change it from the outside. You have got to change it from the inside. Until we as black people decide that we are going to change it internally, we are always going to have problems.

IH: O.K. Thanks, Captain.