UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Dr. Danny Kelley
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IH: Today is February 23, 2007. I am at Prairie View University. The interview is with Dr. Danny Kelly. Dr. Kelly, what is your date of birth?

DK: 14 August 1947.

IH: Where are you from originally?

DK: Cameron, Texas.

IH: Can you talk a little bit about your childhood and growing up and how you got to Prairie View?

DK: Well, I am from a family of 5 children. My mother was a housewife. My dad was an employee of Alcor Aluminum Company in (inaudialbe), Texas which is just about 17 miles from Cameron. Cameron is a small town about a little better than 5,000 people who live there. Our high school at that time when I graduated was for the African American community and I graduated in 1965. I was valedictorian of my class. I came

to Prairie View as a freshman in September of 1965 and graduated from Prairie View in 1969. My first two years at Prairie View, ROTC was compulsory so I opted to go into the advanced course my last 2 years and I was commissioned a lieutenant, second lieutenant in branch armor in 1969. Upon graduation, I went to graduate school at Peabody Conservatory at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and I received my master's degree there in 1971. Subsequent to that, I went on active duty, I spent 3 years. I was assigned to headquarters Department of the Army, Washington, D.C. That gets me up to leaving the Army, going back to graduate school, getting my doctorate and then coming here to Prairie View in 1978 to teach.

IH: Can you talk about your experience a little bit during the PV ROTC, maybe some of the things that jumped out to you, like, for example, did any of your instructors comment about, you know, you were going into a white army or anything like that or certain things that would prepare you as a person of color going into an integrated system?

DK: As I recollect, of course, that has been almost 40 years ago but I do not think that there was ever a big thing made out of the fact that I was an African American officer going into one that was predominantly non-African American. What was stressed repeatedly is that we had to be prepared to be officers in the Army and that we had to be prepared to meet troops if we needed them in combat situations. We had to be able to compete. The U.S. Army had to be able to complete globally with other armed forces across the world. And so, they were dedicated wholeheartedly to helping us to become

officers, excellent officers, in the United States Army. Now, this required an awful lot of discipline. They monitored our class work. Of course, there were certain academic requirements in order to remain a member of the advanced course ROTC. They planned social activities for us. We were given a good dose of etiquette, much of it military etiquette. We were given military history. We, of course, had the summer session at Fort Sill, Oklahoma where we actually lived as soldiers in the Army, had leadership positions, we had physical training, we had all types of combat training and those types of things. So, it was a comprehensive education in the military that served me well once I went on active duty.

IH: From your experience looking back, do you think that graduating from an HBCU gave you something that could not have been attained at a traditionally white ROTC program or OCS?

DK: Probably so. I think one of the big advantages of attending and graduating from an HBCU is that you do develop a strong sense of history for the culture, African American culture. And while having attended one where predominantly at that time, at the time that I was a student here, the faculty was African American, having come from a small town where there were no African Americans who had professional degrees, M.D.s and Ph.D.s, I was overwhelmed to come to a community as small as Prairie View and every other professor I saw was Dr. So and So and Dr. So and So. So, there was a real substantial middle class here at Prairie View. I was immersed in one which was African American which I was not accustomed to in my small town. So, that was a real source of inspiration to me. I had real professional role models that I decided that I was really

proud of myself, so I think that my inspiration to further my education was certainly enhanced by the 4 years I spent here at Prairie View in this environment.

IH: During the mid to late 1960s and early 1970s, you were in school as a really young person. Can you talk about or describe . . . here you are as a black officer, or in the process of becoming one, and we have an unpopular war happening in Vietnam and you could possibly be maimed for life or die in Vietnam, while back here in the United States, we have the Black Power Movement and we have the Civil Rights going on. Did you ever have feelings of questioning like, man, why are we doing this? I mean, here it is, I am going to fight for this but I do not have equal rights as a person of color back in the United States.

DK: Well, that certainly was an issue now and it still is an issue now when we look in terms of the international scene. One of the issues that I think was so prevalent then is that we were having troops, we were having Americans killed in Vietnam, we were spending billions of dollars in a war that, in the final analysis, did not mean that there was a military victory for the United States. There was not one for Vietnam. We just simply went to the table, signed the treaty that said it is over. And so, I think that that probably could have happened without all of the lives that were killed and, of course, with the Civil Rights Movement in this country during the time, there was an awful lot of consternation from our GIs who came back to the country and they fought over there in fox holes with those troops over there and there was no problem because they were faced with one objective and that is basically to win the war if possible and certainly to save

their own lives. But once they came back to the United States, they did not have that type of lateral equality with the persons with whom they had fought. So, there were a lot of issues that had to be settled there. Then, of course, with the opposition to the war, I saw so many people who were able to desert the country, go to Canada and other countries in order to get out of doing military duty. I observed that it was very difficult for an African American to be granted conscientious objectiveship to the war. I had some white friends who, based on their religious convictions, were able to get this type of classification and not have to go to the military. So, I found that there were a disproportionate number of African Americans whose lives went over there, were put at risk and, of course, they were killed in Vietnam. So, there were lots of issues involved with our emphasis in this United States on the war in Vietnam in addition to what we were actually fighting here on our home front domestically. So, there were a lot of issues. So, I guess the final analysis was, you know, it really was not something that I think we should have been engaged in and in the final analysis, I am not sure it made a big difference for us in relationship to what we had put into it.

IH: I see. O.K. And, I guess, looking at all of that - Civil Rights and Vietnam and the Black Power Movement - for figures like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, who do you think that blacks most identified during that time period?

DK: Martin Luther King and Malcolm X? It is very difficult. They were quite different in their approaches in a sense. Their objectives were the same. Martin Luther King dealt more with nonviolence and, you know, Malcolm X, was by any means,

necessary. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and that type of thing. I do not know which one really impressed the most because I think it was probably equally divided. And, of course, the legacy of Martin Luther King is a much more prominent one now because of the things he espoused -- the fact that he was more willing to go to the table and negotiate in order to get the things that he was looking for and ultimately, they both lost their lives probably as a result of the struggle that they were protagonists in, but I think it is probably 50/50. You found that the older, more conservative African Americans identified with Martin Luther King's views and the younger, more radical ones, probably identified with Malcolm X more.

IH: Sometimes, unfortunately, with radicalism, it seems that Malcolm X embodied a more militant, masculine posture than Martin Luther King did.

IH: As a black man coming up, I mean, even now, we have these issues of masculinity and proving our manhood. Did you feel, even though it was compulsory that you go into the ROTC program, did you feel that it was a right of passage or things that made you, hey, I am really becoming a man by being part of this?

DK: Well, I do not know if that was an issue but I think that . . . I figured that we all had a military obligation to the country and there were many fronts that needed to be protected. Of course, so it was an obligation. I came up under the era of the draft so at 17 years old or 16, whatever it was at that time, you had to register. So, since that was woven into the fabric of our American culture, you did not think about it. You just went

down to the Selective Service and you signed up and you knew that you were out there and if there was a war or need for it, you would have go to in the military. So, we did not really think about it. At least, I did not think about it as a rite of passage. Maybe had I become a Marine, maybe that would have been the case but just in the regular Army, you know, it was what I had to do, it was my duty, to go pay my dues to the country in terms of protecting it and when that is done, we are through with it. So, I do not know, I had a rather pedestrian, I guess, relationship with that but you know, it was what everyone had done and generations before me had done it so it was just my time to go and do that. So, that is really what . . . I took it, whatever the case may be.

IH: I want to name a few, since we are still on the subject of masculinity, a few prominent figures, figures such as Mohammad Ali, Jim Brown, Hughey Newton, Tommy Smith in the 1968 Olympics. Which one of those figures, again, as a person back in the 1960s, represented a figure of masculinity to you and if not them, what figure did or organization? Your dad, uncle, something? Or something you wanted to emulate maybe?

DK: Well, it is always a safe thing to say your dad. He was the breadwinner, our hero. I mean, you know, there are a lot of people who I guess it would have been admirable in terms of that aspect, a masculinity-type of thing and you really wanted to tailor your life after them but Muhammad Ali - great for what he did at that time. He was very outspoken. He paid the ultimate price not to go into the military but, of course, even then, as I felt now, his being released of that responsibility came from the fact that he had

the money to get the type of assistance that he needed. The average American could not go through the court system and fight it but he was able to do it because he was able to sustain the costs of that. So, I am not sure that he was necessarily a role model. I think he was much more radical then than what we see now. I mean, you know, the old saying that yesterday is radical, today is conservative, just lets us know that we think of people in different lights than we did and people become different as they become older. So, you know, I had a lot of respect for a lot of people during that time. I think Martin Luther King was certainly admirable in many respects. Thurgood Marshall was, you know, a prominent figure during that time. Jesse Jackson was emerging at that time. Abernathy. They worked with Martin Luther King. I mean, there were a lot of people who really put their lives on the line -- the people who were really not concerned about the things that we are so concerned about now. Back in those days, you had the Freedom Riders. Those were the people, by today's standards, who had no homes, they had no jobs and so, you know, they went and they carried much of the weight of the Civil Rights Movement on their backs because they did not have things that they worried about moving. They did not have to worry about someone bombing their houses because they did not have them. So, they got on the buses, they had meals, they had housing and they had transportation. They saw parts of the country that they would never had seen had they not been involved in the process. So, there is an awful lot of admiration from me for those people who did not have to protect anything. They did not have to worry about, you know, if someone was going to gun down my mother, father, (inaudible.) They were just sort of out there and they were very, very important in terms of moving the movers. I admired those

people then and I still do now because many of them sacrificed their lives for what we now many times take for granted. So, it was a combination of people.

IH: You said you did some of your duty in Washington?

DK: Yes, I did my entire military duty in Washington, D.C.

IH: Can you talk about what that was like dealing with like your commanders and NCOs?

DK: Well, being a junior officer assigned to headquarters Department of the Army in Washington, D.C., it is a privilege and quite a rare opportunity. When I went on active duty after having received my master's degree from Johns Hopkins which was 1971, the war was phased out right prior to receiving my master's degree. There were an excess of lieutenants going on active duty. So, they would only let lieutenants stay in. The new ones who were obligated such as I was could only stay in for 89 days which was 1 day short of being able to qualify for VA benefits. So, they called us active duty to training officers. So, we went in, you go in, they take you on active duty for that and then you would be released to the Reserves for 6 years or whatever it would be to do the rest of your obligation. But for you to go to the Office of Basic Corps, which I did and then, in the class, they would let 1% of the class which was maybe 75 people, compete for the privilege of staying on active duty if you wanted to. Well, the majority of them did not want to. I wanted to because I was getting married. I went on active duty in September

and 2 weeks after, I was getting married. I needed a job. So, I had to compete in order to stay on active duty. And as a result of that, I was allowed to go on active duty for 3 years and they let me choose where I would like to be assigned. And so, I took in Washington, D.C. So, that is how I got to Washington.

Normally, I would not have gotten that type of thing and I wanted to be in Washington so I could still study over in Baltimore. So, it was an experience to be in Washington as a lieutenant and I really did not experience an awful lot of relationship to me as an African American. I mean, you know, in Washington, D.C., there are so many generals there, so many whatever the case and everybody is passing each other on the street but it was really quite different than being on a post, where you could get pegged one way or the other. People like you or don't like you and give you opportunities or don't give them to you simply because of . . . Washington, you know, was just a melting pot. You were just one person on the streets and that type of thing. So, I mean, it was nothing to sit down at a table next to a table full of three star generals and just everybody goes, everybody stands in line, you do not have any of the hierarchy where there are places reserved for general officers in Washington. They stand at the bus stops just like (inaudible.) And when the line says this general can get on, nobody gets off the bus with them - they all just get in line and that type of thing. As a matter of fact, when I was there, periodically memos would come down saying that they noticed that general officers are not being saluted by NCOs, you know. All of a sudden, they are so common; you do not even notice them and that type of thing. Whereas, on a post, you know, that is a totally different type of thing. A general eats at a certain place; he has a driver in Washington, D.C. I was quite unusual because I was a lieutenant and I had an

automobile and a driver assigned to me, sympathy cars. I commanded a postal unit that monitored mail at Dulles Airport. So, they did it 24 hours a day. So, in order to get the troops there, they had to have a car to transport them there, three shifts per day. So, being a lieutenant, it was really neat for me in Washington, D.C. because being a general officer in Washington, you could not have a car assigned to you unless you had three stars. So, one and two star generals, they could get a car but they had to call up and reserve it and those types of things. I had one. I had several general officers coming to me saying, "Lieutenant Kelley, can I use your car?" Naturally, I did not refuse them. So, that was quite a great experience. I worked for Lawnside Retired Military Officers. So, it was a great experience for me. I worked downtown Washington, D.C. in the _____ building, so it was quite different than having the usual experience which is a requirement for junior grade officers to be on the post and have (inaudible.) I was there in Washington, D.C. It was just a blessing.

IH: Did you have any experience with racial tension during your career?

DK: I really did not. I really, really did not. Perhaps there was some covert stuff but it just did not faze me. I never was a victim of that.

IH: Did you have any problems with whites, like maybe this was their first experience having a person of color in a position of supervision, nothing like that?

DK: I never experienced any of that. I was fortunate. The unit that I commanded maybe had 15 or 20 people in it and out of those; I only had maybe 2 African Americans. The rest of them were white. But they did not seem to have any problem with me and I did not have any problem with them. They did their job, I did my job and we parted and went on our ways. I just never experienced that.

IH: During your free time - Washington, D.C. is a very cosmopolitan city - did you tend to socialize more with the whites or with the blacks and did they have then politically correct functions that you had to attend as an officer to stay in good standing?

DK: Very few of them. Those that were put on . . . I was assigned to the Adjunct General's Office, so the Adjunct General of the Army would have certain military things and we were obligated to go to those. You had to go to those. But they were always fun affairs. It was no problem. My commanding officer at the Postal Service there also had those. The adjuvant general had his annual ball and we went to that. Since I was the only lieutenant assigned to the adjuvant general's office, I was given the privilege of giving the toast at the ball simply because I was the youngest officer there. So, I sat together with the adjuvant general and his wife. It was a good situation. But aside from the military aspect of it, there were many social events. Washington has a very active African American community so, you know, we socialized on that level exclusively with African Americans and our growth of our church experiences and many of the government workers there, I got to know them because I worked with them. So, they would have all types of activities and we were always involved in those. So, our social

life did revolve around the African American community. What I was involved in as far as the military is concerned was of that nature. I did not have an African American officer as my supervisor the whole while I was there in the Army.

IH: Concerning the promotion system, the OERs, the officer efficiency reports, do you feel that that was a fair system?

DK: I think it was because, you know, you were evaluated by one officer and that was reviewed by another level. And so, I always received objective evaluations for my work when I was there. I think it is a good system. It is not just one person looking at you but actively two people looking at you and, you know, there is an endorsement like that, so I think that is a good way to do it.

IH: Did you see any things in the promotion system that you felt needed attention that could make them even more effective or anything like that?

DK: I did not. Of course, at the time I was there, to go from . . . I was in for 3 years and I went from first lieutenant to second lieutenant. Normally within 3 years, I could have become a captain but Congress backed that up and then it took just when I was ready to become a first lieutenant, it took me one more year to become first lieutenant. Man, I was ready to become a captain. It took one more year when I got out of the Army as a first lieutenant. So, at that level, it is fairly automatic if you do your job and your decent evaluations. The problem comes, of course, when you get (inaudible) and you

become a major lieutenant colonel and colonel, then it is more of an issue about . . . they are much more of a stickler about that. But at the time I was in, if you spend the time in rank and you kept your nose clean, you could go from second lieutenant to first lieutenant with no problem, and then first lieutenant to captain. Now, once you go from captain to major, then it is a whole different type of thing.

IH: So, the jump from captain to major, that is where it became a lot more subjective?

DK: Yes, that is right. That type of a thing.

IH: I guess depending if you have been . . . I had read some things that only Vietnam was your ticket punched, like if a person had served there, it could be more challenging.

DK: Yes, that is true, and I think it is relatively the same way, you know. And then, as you go on up to a general officer, then, of course, my personal feeling is that the aspect of politics is much more involved. I think it is very difficult to become a general officer if you are not married for the simple reason that you have social events and you always need someone with you at that formal event. So, if you are up for general and you do not have a wife, it probably is very difficult to become a general officer. Now, if you are a widow, that is a different type thing. But there are so many functions where you have to have a someone with you, you just do not show up single handed, you have got to have an escort with you. So, you know, that is a real factor.

IH: At that age, it might be hard to get a wife!

DK: That's right.

IH: Let me ask you, what strategies did you develop as an officer and professionally, and that would be right now, to become a professional leader and what type of mentors did you have, I mean, even if they were out of your command? Maybe Becton or somebody? I just threw that name out there.

DK: Well, of course, I did not know General Becton very well. I knew his name and back in those days when he was still on active duty, he did not make a lot of trips here to the campus. I knew who he was, I knew he was the first general officer to have his roots in Prairie View and that type of thing. I think once I was in a restaurant and I saw General Chappie James who was an Air Force general, coming to the restaurant and I did not know who he was, I just looked at his shoulders and saw that he had two stars on at that time, then I found out who he was after that. And it was really something because he had such . . . he had chauffeured up, everybody was just waiting on him and that type of thing. It was sort of a neat thing. So, that type of an experience, I think that sort of shaped me and I was actually able to observe more general rank officers having been assigned to Washington, D.C. and colonels and lieutenant colonels than I would have anywhere else. So, that was a real source of inspiration for me, and I always thought it would be neat to be in a position where you could influence people, you know, and that

sort of carried with me. When I got out of the Army, I knew I was not going to make a career out of the Army because I was not in music (?) so that really was not . . . I could not get into that. I enjoyed my job; I enjoyed the people I worked with. I went into the Army with a real appreciation for quality work. I had that instilled in me when I was in elementary school, by my parents. And so, that part of it was fine. A sense of urgency, being able to do what you needed to do and do it on time and do it well, those were types of character building traits that had really been instilled in me throughout my life. So, the Army was an opportunity for me to display much of which I had been taught in all those years. And to have that reinforced with people who obviously had a real good handle on that was really a great opportunity for me. And so, you know, being in Washington, just being able to see them, being able to talk to them, is really something.

Then, about two years ago, there was a meeting that I attended in Alabama. It was the first gathering of African Americans, generals, and I went there as a dean to the meeting. It was something like 27 of them were there at that time. It was Army. It was unbelievable to see a gathering of so many of those retired and active duty in one spot, all African Americans, you know, and that sort of spurred me on, even at this age to say, hey, they are really out there, that it is really strengthening. So, you know, lots of ways.

IH: That would be really the best thing to go to. From your experience, again, taking your military career and professional career into account as an educated professional looking back, what do you feel were the biggest problems in the military in relation to being a person of color during that era?

DK: The biggest problems?

IH: Yes, or challenges?

DK: I don't know. I was sort of removed from a lot of that so I am not sure that I could really give an accurate response to that but I think, you know, from a comprehensive standpoint, the challenge is always out there as far as I am concerned of being in the military is separation from family, being transported at a moment's notice from your zone that you are comfortable in and having to go. That, to me, has always been an issue. And, of course, the fact is that at a moment's notice, your life can be put on the line. That has never changed in the military. That is from the Confederate days and the Union days of those armies up until now. And I think that, to me, is a challenge but that is the nature of the beast. That is what the military is all about - protecting the shores of this country. And I would imagine the military pretty well reflects what our society and America is all about. African Americans, we are still faced with the same type of things in the military, the same people, who are not in the military. African Americans are always having to prove that we really are as good as we say we are. We always have to validate our claims. I have to do that right now here at Prairie View, you know, that type of thing. So, that is a challenge that we are always faced with. Now, if other ethnicities feel the same way, I do not know but as an African American, that is something that we are constantly faced with wherever we are - if it is in the military or the corporate world, whatever the case may be, we have to produce students here who are going to have to get in a competitive world once they get out of here. You know, the challenges of the

military are really no different than they are otherwise except the one that I started out in answer to this question - they separate you from family, the fact that your life could be on the line at the drop of a hat. The military is not democratic. They tell you what to do, you know, and then you have to do it. So, you do not have an opportunity to express yourself as an individual. You become part of an institution.

IH: And, I guess kind of wrapping up, what do you feel people need to know about African Americans' military service during the Vietnam era that has not been told or written about, if anything?

DK: I would imagine there are a lot of unsung heroes from that era. I would imagine there are a lot of African Americans who played vital parts in that conflict that we have never even heard of. We hear the disproportionate number of African Americans who lost their lives but we do not hear enough about the ones who did not lose their lives, who really made an impact on what that whole conflict was all about. And that is sort of the dilemma of African Americans in the history of this country. The story really needs to be told. And, you know, I don't know how many books - I haven't read any - I don't know how many books have been written on the role of the African American solider in the Vietnam conflict but I would imagine not a lot of them have been written. And, of course, it really is a responsibility of us as African Americans to really carry the torch. That is so important. The white man has written his history thoroughly to the point that he has included what he wants and he has excluded what he wants, and much of this that has been excluded has been relative to us as African Americans. So, it is really our

responsibility to write the history of our people if it is going to be told properly and I think it is our responsibility. So, I think there is a lot out there that no one even knows went on and I think it is our responsibility to really hear about it.

IH: And that is why I am here to get these stories. As far as the books written on blacks in Vietnam, I have read almost all of them and there is, not fiction but historical accounts, less than 17, and this war lasted basically from 1961 to 1973, and we had almost 8,000 African American deaths, 300,000 amputees, wounded, guys like that, you know, and the story has not been told. Only less than 20 books to tell all that. That is basically it. Thank you.