

Interviewee: Becton, Julius

Interview: July 31, 2007

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

Interview with: Lieutenant General Julius Becton

Interviewed by: Isaac Hampton II

Date: July 31, 2007

Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

Topic: Black Officer, OCS, Vietnam, Racial Tension

IH: The date of this interview is 7/31/2007. The interview is with Lieutenant General Julius Wesley Becton, Jr. This was a telephone interview while he was at his home in Springfield, Virginia. The actual interview will begin in approximately 10 to 12 seconds. There was a recording problem in the beginning and I am trying to clean up some of the dead air and recording problems initially with the interview.

. . . So, here, you were the first Prairie View graduate to become a general. In November of 1989, you were president of Prairie View. In 1960, you got your B.S. in mathematics from P.V. and in July of 1944 . . . when did you enter the Army? Was it 1944 or 1943?

JWB: I signed up in the Army Air Corps Enlisted Reserves in December of 1943. I came on active duty in July of 1944.

IH: O.K., and you were commissioned at the age of 19?

JWB: From OCS, yes.

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IH: O.K., wow that is impressive. 19 years old. And you were the commander of the 7th Corps in Germany. And then, as a civilian, you were the FEMA director for 4 years, nominated by President Ronald Reagan. And several times, you were nominated by *Ebony* Magazine as one of those influential 100 black Americans. And in 1972 is when you put on your first star, on 01 August. Is that correct?

JWB: That is correct.

IH: In this section, there were some recording problems. The discussion was on General Becton making the rank of Major General in 1974 along with General Brooks. The rest of the interview will follow without any interruptions, in approximately another 7 to 8 seconds.

. . . in November is when you put on your third star as Lieutenant General, correct?

JWB: I got promoted to Lieutenant General in 1978, yes.

IH: O.K. that is quite a track record. That is so impressive. Let me ask you this: What were the things that drove you for these types of accomplishments? What types of things were the motivating factors?

JWB: Motivated me to stay in the Army?

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IH: Yes, and for this type of accomplishment. I mean, these are extraordinary accomplishments that you have done. It is very impressive.

JWB: I don't think anything motivated anyone to accomplish something like that. I had the opportunity and it went from there. But the question, what motivated me to stay in the Army, that is a different question.

IH: Well, let me rephrase it. From all of the general officers I spoke with, and just people in general, I mean, usually, there is something that has been instilled in them from maybe their parents or grandparents that just kept them going and I am just curious - was there anything in particular that kept you going to accomplish these things in particular?

JWB: Have you ever been in the Army?

IH: Yes, sir.

JWB: How long did you spend?

IH: I was in 4 years.

JWB: Therefore, you know that when you are in the Army, you have got a job to do and you try to do that job to the best of your ability. Is that correct?

IH: Yes, sir.

JWB: And when you are recognized for having done that job to the best of your ability and then schooling, promotions, assignment come along, one feed the other, and each time, you are driven to do the best you can. And if I have any one thing that helped me to do that, I knew that my background was such that I had to work maybe a little bit harder because I was in the Army from 1944 until 1960 without a degree and I was competing against folks who had their degrees, as an example. I had the kinds of assignments in which I knew I could make good things happen and in every assignment that I had, we were able to excel and I say "we" because I was married in 1948 and it was a team effort.

IH: O.K. Excellent. So, you said it was a team effort?

JWB: Yes, my wife and I formed a team and in every job I had, with the exception of command and combat, my wife was present.

IH: O.K. So, going back a little bit, we are kind of going to jump around just a little bit in the beginning. Can you talk a little bit about your childhood and what it was like growing up in Pennsylvania?

JWB: Well, we are from suburban Philadelphia and went to an integrated school. As a matter of fact, I never heard of the word "integration" when I was growing up. It was the

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only school we had to go to. There were a percentage of blacks, probably less than 5%. I never had a black instructor until I reached Prairie View in 1957. I was born in the Baptist church, raised by two very God-fearing parents, one brother, no sisters. We walked to school, to the elementary school, called grammar school, rode a bus to junior high and later, senior high school. I was in a system of tracking. In K through 7, they had A track and B track. A track was for the more rapid learners and B was for the slower learners. And from kindergarten through 7th grade, I was in the A track except for 4th grade. In junior high and high school, I participated in athletics, specifically, football and track, and did well.

IH: O.K. In football, what position did you play?

JWB: We played both ways - center on offense, linebacker on defense.

IH: O.K. Coming up again during this time period, did you have a recollection of your grandparents? Were your grandparents around when you were growing up?

JWB: Only my maternal grandfather and my mother's stepmother, but not my father.

IH: Do you remember them sharing any advice or anything like that when you were a young child that stayed with you as an adult or anything like that?

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JWB: No. My paternal grandfather was located in Caroline County, Virginia, where they had dirt roads, kerosene lanterns for light, outhouse for facilities, and a well for drawing water, for drinking water. And I visited with him from about the time I was, that I can recall, 4 or 5, until I reached high school age. And he, by that time, was deceased.

IH: Now, coming up as a young man, did you have any role models outside of your father that you gravitated towards or anything like that?

JWB: Probably, I would say my father was one. The minister of our church was another, a Reverend J. Arthur Younger, and a medical doctor was a third, and that is about it.

IH: O.K., now, fast forwarding, coming up to World War II, in your community, after the war started with Japan when they bombed Pearl Harbor, what was the atmosphere like in your community? Were a lot of people going directly to sign up for military service?

JWB: The answer is yes. We had a total effort in fighting the war. We had everything from people volunteering, as did I, to sign up, to rationing of gas, silk, tires - the whole 9 yards. We had civil defense and we practiced it. We had 45 mile speed limits that we followed. That was designed to save gas. In suburban Philadelphia, mainline Philadelphia, it was a major effort supporting the war.

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IH: Now, at age 19, were you drafted or did you volunteer for military service?

JWB: I see you were not listening. I enlisted. I joined the Army Air Corps Enlisted Reserves in December of 1943.

IH: O.K., I am sorry. I did not hear you on that.

JWB: And I did that so that I could become a fighter pilot. General Haps Arnold, the Chief of Staff of the Army Air Corps, visited our school back when I was a senior. He visited that school because he had graduated from that same school many years earlier and gave us a vivid description about what it was to be a fighter pilot. That was in September of 1943. And in December of 1943, 6 of us, all football players, went down to become members of the Enlisted Reserve Corps.

IH: O.K. So, once you were in military service, can you talk a little bit about the training?

JWB: The early training?

IH: Yes, sir.

JWB: Well, let's start at the beginning. I came on active duty in July of 1944, after graduating from high school. I went off to (inaudible) . . . the 6 of us went to reception

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station together. Then, I never saw them again because I went one way, the other 5 went another way. They were white, I was black. I was sent to Kiesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi, in what was then called a preflight training program in preparation for going off to Tuskegee. I never got to Tuskegee because I was disqualified for vision at Kiesler Field. I had astigmatism. I knew that going in because when I first started taking the physicals, I found out that I had to work very hard to see the chart. I developed the practice of taking one good look at the chart when it was up there when I first walked into the room and I was swift enough to be able to memorize that chart, frontwards, backwards, upwards, down, left or right. So, when I sat down and covered my right eye or left eye, I was able to read the chart. When I got to Kiesler Field, they had a different approach. They had a stool sitting in a room, a darkened room, you walk in, no chart up there, you cover one eye, then they push a projector which line they wanted me to read and I could not see it. As a result, I got disqualified. From Kiesler Field, I went off to MacDill Field in Tampa, Florida, part of an Army aviation engineer battalion. And the only thing aviation about that was that we put down a pure steel platform for landing. It was back breaking work and it was obviously an all black unit. While there after my second or third week, the first sergeant one day, one Friday, came out and said, "Any of you boys can type?" Well, I had typing in high school. "I can." So, I went in and became his clerk after typing for him Saturday and Sunday. I also had one other function that was, to read the roster to him because he was illiterate and could not read. This is the first sergeant. He was swift enough that I could read it to him and he would memorize that roster. As a result, I became his clerk from that time on. A couple of weeks later, one of our lieutenants, and all the lieutenants were white, told the first

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sergeant that there was a list posted on the post on the far side of the field at MacDill.

There was going to be an Officer Kennedy board meeting and he knew that I had been an applicant for aviation and he suggested to the first sergeant and the first sergeant suggested to me that I should go over and take a look. To make a long story short, I did go, got the application, passed the board at MacDill and in December of 1944, went to Columbus, Georgia, Fort Benning for OCS. Once I arrived there, I, like several others, had no infantry training but had received Air Corps training. So, those of us who fit that category were sent off to infantry basic training at Anniston, Alabama, Fort McClellan. We spent 6 weeks there getting a type of pre-infantry rooming, sent back to Fort Benning, and had started the course at Benning OCS the first part of 1945. I graduated from OCS on 16 August of 1945.

IH: O.K.

JWB: That is the extent of the enlisted training.

IH: O.K. Now, in the email that you sent me, you said that you served in the 369th Infantry Regiment, 93rd Division?

JWB: That is correct.

IH: O.K., and then from there, you went over to the Pacific Theater?

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JWB: That was in the Pacific Theater.

IH: O.K.

JWB: The 93rd Division was deployed to the Pacific. I joined them after the Japanese had surrendered. I arrived there in late September. I was sent to the 3rd Battalion of the 369th, specifically, Charlie Company, and stayed with that unit until it deactivated in January of 1945. I did not have enough points to come home as they were requiring who would go home and who would go elsewhere, and I was reassigned to Manila, Philippines to a signal unit. And I stayed with the 542nd heavy construction, signal heavy construction company from January of 1946 until time to be separated in October of 1946.

IH: O.K., and then, from that point, you were in the Active Reserve after that?

JWB: In October of 1946, I was reassigned to the USA Army Reserve as a signal officer and in February of 1947, I went off to Muhlenberg College as a premed student. I went in with advanced credit because I had taken college courses in Manila. Also, because of a GED test that I took and several other VA aptitude tests. I stayed in Muhlenberg until the summer of 1948. It was then that President Truman signed the Executive Order 9981, basically doing away with a segregated military. I had gotten married in January of 1948 and we were expecting a youngster in December of 1948, and I decided to apply back for active duty, which I did and was called back to active duty on 01 December, 1948. I was assigned to Fort Monmouth for a period while our

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first child was born and then I was reassigned to Fort Bliss, Texas, to a signal battalion.

The purpose of that recall was to apply for a regular Army appointment and I was one of 1,000 officers during this particular year competing for regular Army appointment that started on the 15th of January, 1949. No, that is not correct. 15 January 1950.

IH: O.K., so if we can fast forward a little bit to in June of 1950, we have the beginning of the Korean War and I was, again, looking over your bio, that you were in Poussaint?

JWB: We transferred . . . we deployed from Fort Lewis to Korea the second week in July of 1950, and I ended up at what was known as the Poussaint Perimeter.

IH: So, during your time in Korea, obviously, you were in heavy combat. In Korea, you received two Purple Hearts in a lot of heavy combat?

JWB: We did see quite a bit of combat.

IH: Now, at this time, let me ask you this: Executive Order 9881 came down in 1948. Now, by the time you reached Korea, was your unit integrated by then or was it still consisting mainly of all black, unit was all black or integrated?

JWB: The Second Infantry Division had 3 rifle, 3 infantry regiments, one of which was the 9th Infantry Regiment, and this third battalion was black. The other two regiments,

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39th and 23rd, were white. It also had one field (inaudible) battalion that was black.

Charlie Rangel was a sergeant in that battalion.

IH: Oh, yes, the congressman. O.K.

JWB: So, when we deployed to Korea, we deployed basically in a segregated unit, only having a white commander in our battalion.

IH: O.K. Now, during the Korean War, for your NCOs, the black NCOs and things like that, were you particularly close to them? I do not mean personally but I mean did you ever have any problems out of your NCOs or anything like that?

JWB: I did not. We had good NCOs, and I had been around the Army long enough to understand the relationship between NCO and officer.

IH: O.K., moving on past the Korean conflict . . .

JWB: You use the term "conflict." I have never, never used that term, nor will you find anybody who spent time there use the term "conflict." It was the Korean War.

IH: O.K., the Korean War, pardon me. After the Korean War, I want to fast forward to the late 1950s, during the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Now, in 1958, where were you stationed at then?

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JWB: In 1958, I was at Prairie View as an ROTC instructor. I arrived there in June of 1957 and was an instructor, going to school as a student, commonly referred to as a nontraditional student, and after I received my degree under the Army's Final Semester Plan, which was a plan set aside for officers who had not completed their collegiate work, once they got within a semester of their degree, they went as full-time students paid for by the Army. I received my degree in May of 1960 and was sent from there to the Command General Staff College at Leavenworth. And yes, Prairie View was very segregated territory, as was the city of Houston.

IH: O.K., now, as an ROTC instructor and, again, this is during the Jim Crow laws are still around even though it has passed *Brown v. Board*, was there anything in particular that you passed on to the cadets to prepare them for serving in the military as a person of color?

JWB: I was the instructor for the juniors which is the first year of the advanced ROTC, and I shared with them everything I could in terms of growing up, in terms of activities, in terms of operations, in terms of human relations, because I had been exposed to, by the time that I left in August of 1950 when our regiment in Korea started to get integrated, I had been in an integrated unit from that time on. And so, I was able to talk with our students about the life of a soldier.

IH: Now, after integration, did you ever have any experiences with racial tension or anything like that within your command?

JWB: Sure.

IH: Can you talk about that?

JWB: Well, when I was a brigade commander, colonel, at Fort Hood, Texas, we had racial problems, small riots on post. Many of us spent a lot of time running around post at night making sure that our areas were secure. That did not stop other units from having the problems of racial problems, to include marine MPs to quell the problem to riot. And that was in as late as 1971. The Army had major racial problems back in those days - not in combat I might add.

IH: When you were at P.V. and you said there was a lot of segregation there, can you tell me what were your feelings concerning the Civil Rights Movement? Again, back in the late 1950s and early 1960s when Martin Luther King really started to gain momentum - some of his ideas and practices.

JWB: Well, I think I was typical of most of the folks in my group, in my cohort. We realized that we were in uniform and we had a job to do and that the best way we could help the Civil Rights Movement was to do that job as well as we could, so that it could not be said that we are not qualified. Were we going to carry placards? No, I did not. Would I? No, I would not. I felt that I was demonstrating my support by doing my job better than anyone else could do it.

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IH: O.K. Now, during this time as well, I mean, here it is a person serving . . . I asked this to all my interviewees - wearing a uniform and fighting for the country, you have already had two experiences with combat, did anyone ever approach you about rationalizing fighting for a country where you still did not have equal social and civil rights and things like that? Did you ever see that? Even if you had addressed it yourself or were comfortable with that, were any of your colleagues - did you ever see it bother any of them or anything like that, where they questioned what they were doing?

JWB: No, none. None at all. Even the academicians at Prairie View, and we had some rebel rousers at Prairie View but no one ever approached me or any of my colleagues in uniform with that idea.

IH: Now, moving into once Vietnam had started, now we have the Civil Rights passed in 1964 and voting passed in 1965, and then in 1966, we have the beginnings of the Black Power Movement. In your command when these movements started, did you have any of your soldiers that really subscribed to that type of ideology -- you know, giving the Black Power salute and things like that?

JWB: I was not in a unit in the 1965-1966 time period. I was in the Pentagon.

IH: Oh, O.K.

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JWB: But the answer is yes, there were instances when the Black Power salute was given and if the recipient, the officer, let that go by, then he had a major problem. When that happened to you, you stopped it and corrected it.

IH: Did that ever happen to you, where one of your enlisted gave you the Black Power salute?

JWB: Yes, but not in the 1960s. It was closer to the period of 1970, 1971, and as late as 1976. On one particular occasion, driving along in a jeep at Fort Hood, again, as the Division Commander, some soldiers gave the Black Power salute. I stopped the jeep and about the time that I was getting out of the jeep, my sergeant major who was riding behind me, had beat me to it. And I can assure you, those 3 soldiers never did that again.

IH: O.K. What kind of discipline would happen to a soldier who did that? An Article 15 or something along those lines?

JWB: No, just a clearly one-sided conversation about what you should do and what you cannot do, and if they reached that point that they could not do that and they became insubordinate, then they had bigger problems.

IH: O.K., interesting.

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JWB: A major problem that the Army faced in the 1970s, particularly the early 1970s, was that we had a draftee army and we had soldiers who had been to Vietnam and came back and had 4 months, 5 months, maybe 7 months to do before being released. The Army would have been ill-advised to have discharged them right away because the soldier knew you were not going to send him back to combat. You spent much more time trying to deal with that than good soldiers. So those who really wanted to push the limit, they ended up in stockades.

IH: Now, after Tet in 1968, I am trying to think how to phrase this . . . after that happened, did you see Vietnam as, you know, it was a lost cause after Tet or did you still think it was a winnable war?

JWB: As far as we were concerned, we were winning the war. We won Tet. I am not too sure what you know about Tet but my unit was stationed outside of Saigon and we basically kicked their butts. At no time do I recall having the feeling that it was not winnable. I was in an all volunteer unit at 101st Airborne Division and we did a good job but as combat soldiers.

IH: I am well aware that U.S. forces were superior in Vietnam, it is just that I was just curious about what your perspective was on that so, yes, I am absolutely clear on that.

JWB: Right now, you are almost mumbling.

IH: I said I am clear on Vietnam where our forces were superior.

JWB: O.K.

IH: Now, staying in the 1960s, what were your recollections and opinions about Malcolm X?

JWB: What about Malcolm X?

IH: What was your opinion and perspective of Malcolm X and his message that he was trying to put out in the north for African Americans?

JWB: I probably developed far more respect for what he is or what he did after than at the time he was doing it because during that period, the U.S. Army was trained to quell civil unrest. As a brigade commander in the 1970-1971 eras, I had the target cities of Minneapolis, St. Paul - those twin cities - that we were prepared to go to, to put down riots. We were not concerned about who started it. Our job was to maintain the peace and order. So, if Malcolm X was leader of that group, or Stokey Carmichael or any of those other folks, our job was to deal with it.

IH: The black soldiers enlisted in your command, I read some things where some of the blacks refused to fire on or let's say, to engage, other African Americans who were

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protesting. What kind of contingency plan did you have if something like that had happened within the command? Was that even an issue or anything like that then?

JWB: That was not an issue because we made it very clear that once they deployed to a particular area, they were under a chain of command and I held every lieutenant colonel, battalion commander, every captain and company commander, every first sergeant, every platoon sergeant, every platoon leader, responsible for their individual units. And I would expect them to deal with that individual if we had such. So, that was not one of the things I worried about.

IH: O.K. Changing gears to the promotion system in the military and specifically, the OERs. Can you talk a little bit about Dr. Butler's study, what you remember about it when it came out? Dr. Butler's study that he did on the promotion system in the OERs.

JWB: Well, if you ask D.R., he would tell you that there was a study done before that.

IH: Yes, there was.

JWB: And I was the chairman of it, of the OER study group, and we took a very hard look at the OER system going back to the very beginning.

IH: O.K.

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JWB: So, he looked at it from an historical standpoint. We looked at it from what do we need today to make sure we got the appropriate evaluation? So, I cannot talk about what he found in terms of surveying what happened to black report-wise.

IH: Let's talk about your study. It is interesting. I have to admit I read a lot on the OERs but I have not read that one yet. What did your study uncover?

JWB: My study?

IH: Yes.

JWB: We devised a form that was used from 1970 for the next almost 18, 20 years. It was an in-depth assessment of what the report should do, what were the pitfalls of previous reports, how do we go about educating the officer corps on using that report, the OER, and then basically selling it to the Army. And as the senior officer of the three-man study group, it became known as The Becton Study.

IH: I would sure like to read that. And who were the other individuals that worked with you on the study?

JWB: A Colonel Mike Malone and a Colonel Beauford White. I cannot think of the other guy's name right now.

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IH: O.K., that is fine. Now, for your study, and I want you to bear with me if I do not get some of the terms or lingo right but did you design with OER 67-7 on that? Was that your design or anything like that?

JWB: I do not recall the number that it was but the study that we came up with was adopted by the Army in 1970. And it was a 67- something because 67 was the nomenclature for all OERs.

IH: O.K., because in my research, I come all the way up to 67-6, which is kind of where I stopped at but that is interesting. Now, how long did it take to complete the study?

JWB: How long did it take?

IH: Yes, like from start to finish and things like that?

JWB: We probably started on the study about February, maybe late January, of 1969, and we turned in our report probably about June of 1969 because each of us . . . the third person was Jack Jorgensen, Colonel Jack Jorgensen. Each of us were sent off to a senior service college after we finished.

IH: Now, when you said you had to sell it to the Army, was it the secretary of the Army that you briefed on that or the chief of staff or anything like that?

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JWB: We briefed the secretary, the chief of staff, the Army staff, and major commanders.

IH: Now, sticking with the OER theme, do you feel that the OER promotion system was fair?

JWB: Yes. People abused it but the system was fair.

IH: How did they abuse it?

JWB: There are ways that you can say to officers, I have given you exactly what you deserved, and as long as the person who says that uses that approach to everyone, you cannot fuss about it. But if he gives, say, a person who happened to be black what he deserves and then gives another person who happens to be white what the _____ is bearing, there is abuse right there.

IH: O.K., can you talk a little bit about problems with inflation and the OER ratings?

JWB: Yes, at one time, we had a system that if you are rating a particular officer, you would put him into a . . . would he be at the top of his group of cohorts, the middle of his cohorts or the bottom of his cohort group? And the system became abusive when that rater each day would change who would be at the top. And that was not what the system was trying to do, and steps were taken to correct that. [END OF SIDE 1]

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IH: And can you talk a little bit about the steps that were involved with . . . just the major steps, that were involved in fixing the inflation problem?

JWB: Talk about the major steps involved with what?

IH: Fixing the inflation problem.

JWB: Hiring a reviewer to get involved in the process after the rater and the endorser had done their thing. Then, the reviewer's job was to make sure that both of the rating officials used an objective approach. Part of that objectivity came in when you required the reviewer to take a look at the rating patterns of both the rater and the endorser.

IH: O.K.

JWB: And that would tend to minimize the inflation.

IH: O.K., now, from what I have read of Dr. Butler's study, early on when a junior officer, 01 to 03, that is usually where they ran into problems because they did not understand the OER system. Looking back on your career, do you think that was true, that young junior officers were not educated well enough on the OER system?

JWB: Are you saying that they were not well educated enough?

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IH: Yes. I am asking, do you think that was true?

JWB: Yes, which is why we have opposed an approach which later got adopted that the second lieutenant and first lieutenant, the first two or three years, once their reports were in, they would not be provided to promotion boards because we felt there was a learning process and clearly, some folks who came from certain parts of the country maybe were not as swift as other folks and it took them some time to catch up.

IH: O.K., that is interesting. I have a thousand questions about these OERs that you are talking about. I did not know about your study that you had done. I would sure like to read that. Now, coming up to when you put on your first star that was in 1972?

JWB: 1972.

IH: Can you talk about that process when you are going from colonel to brigadier general, you know, what that was like? I mean, what goes into, O.K., you are up for general. I am just wondering what that process is like?

JWB: I am not too sure what you mean by process.

IH: I am just curious what the process is for making general. I mean, you obviously had the schools and the communications but can you talk about what that is like going from colonel to general?

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JWB: They have, among other things, orientation programs for newly appointed general officers. Some call them charm schools. Back when Art Drake and I were coming along, we had 3 days of an orientation. They are now having, I think that orientation can be as much as 1 month to learn about what the challenges are. Keeping in mind, you had done certain things from the time you first started as an officer until that date, you pin on a star. So, you knew what was expected of you, you knew what you had to do, and you had an assignment - just go ahead and do it. The only problem is you go to a higher visibility or, as one of our former chiefs of staff said, "The higher you go up that totem pole, the more your rear end hangs out." And you learn a lot of things that you do not want to do. You learn things to avoid. Some folks learned them and some folks did not learn them. And those who did not learn them, paid the price for it.

IH: Now, when you were going to put on your first star, were you approached by *Jet Magazine* or *Ebony* . . .

JWB: I had been in *Jet* years before that happened, and since I was the 6th black American to be promoted in the Army, to be promoted Brigadier General, we had a lot of visibility, and I might add - Art Drake might have mentioned it - when our list came out in June of 1972, for the first time in the history of our Army, there were 5 black Americans on that list.

IH: And you were the first . . . it was you, General Greg . . .

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JWB: George Shuffer (sp?). Ed Greer and Harry Brooks.

IH: Is General Brooks still living today?

JWB: Yes, he is. He lives in Las Vegas.

IH: O.K., that is a nice warm place to live. O.K., we are almost done here, wrapping up with . . . there are a couple more questions to go. Now, let me ask you this: From your experience, what were the biggest challenges in the military in relation to being a person of color, looking back on your career?

JWB: The biggest challenges of being a person of color and a flight officer?

IH: Yes, sir.

JWB: I would say there were several: One, remember what got you where you are and once you pin that star on, it all of a sudden does not make you something different. I think another sensitive thing - you could say something as a captain, lieutenant colonel, colonel, and say the same thing to a general officer and get yourself in trouble. You had to be sensitive to not only personal conduct but financial accountability. You could write a bad check as a second lieutenant. You write one as a general officer, you are in trouble. Your family also took on certain challenges. You probably have been around people whose fathers were ministers, and that had a bearing upon the conduct of that

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person. You have to be concerned as to be sensitive to where you are seen in uniform. Note that there is nothing I have mentioned so far is related to a job. It is more of a personal conduct thing. There were no major changes in my approach to the job once I became a general officer because I had a job to do and we did it. And I was able to deal with the men and women that I had assigned to me. As you read in Bill Robertson's email, I think I sent that to you. Did I send that to you?

IH: I don't . . .

JWB: The men who were with me in combat?

IH: I might have it.

JWB: I did send it because I sent it along with the portion of my bio, my autobiography. But the same group that I fought with went out as lieutenant colonels and they were majors and captains, we are still friends today, we still go out today together. We meet as alumni of that unit every other year. So, obviously, they have not changed, nor have I changed.

IH: O.K. Coming down to the last question, what do you feel people should know about African Americans' military service during the Vietnam era that has not been told or written about or has not been given enough attention?

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JWB: Let me give you one example, I think, might help to understand that. We were in a pretty big fire fight when word came out that Robert Kennedy had been killed and later on, Martin Luther King had been killed. We read about the riots taking place back in the states. My family was in Washington, D.C. and they saw blocks and fire and flame. We had less than . . . we had maybe 8% black Americans in my unit. We had to use the memorial service for people and then we went back to do our job. Shortly thereafter, a reporter from *Chicago Defender* came out to our unit in the field, sent by division, and he wanted to talk to my soldiers. "Be my guest." "Well, who is going to escort me?" "You want to talk to my soldiers, talk to them. I do not intend to waste people taking you around." "You mean, I can go talk to anybody I want to?" "Yes, you may." He spent the better part of one day with us. Left us, went back to Saigon, I presume back to Chicago, and that was in spring of 1968. I have yet to see one word that he wrote. And I say that because he had certain expectations and we did not fulfill those expectations. I suspect he was looking for racial problems and we did not have any. So, when you say what is it that came out from a black American, say, in Vietnam, I think not all the stories have been told because we did not fulfill someone's expectation. I would also say that those folks who suggest that the United States Army lost Tet do not know what the hell they are talking about. What we lost? We lost the public support. It was the public support that caused us the problem of getting out of Vietnam. And I have had the privilege of going back to Vietnam since then several years ago, and it was not a very comfortable feeling going to the places where we were being vilified as killers of babies and women and those kinds of things. But they are happy to take your dollar right now.

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IH: Oh, yes. I am sure they are. O.K. Do you have anything else to add for that part as far as really positive aspects about African American service during the Vietnam era?

JWB: Well, I just think that history reflects that those who did serve and did well, good things happened to them. One of our later general officers got the Medal of Honor - Charlie Rogers, our (inaudible.) We had those who fought in Vietnam, have done very well for themselves. A fellow named Colon Powell and Art Drake and Ed Greer, Harry Brooks. Harry later commanded a division, as did I. And I do not think any of us that got promoted to division commander got appointed division commander because of our color or because of "affirmative action."

IH: I read someplace, was it in 1972 - I cannot remember - where the Army publicly came out and said, you know, they support affirmative action plan. Now, correct me if I am wrong on that.

JWB: Say that again.

IH: They realized affirmative action, not that there was going to be affirmative action in the military but was there some talk about where the Army recognized there were problems racially within the ranks and that people of color had not been promoted fairly?

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JWB: The Department of Defense established a race relations equal opportunity institute, later changed their name to DEOMI, which is . . . all of a sudden, I am drawing a mental blank on DEOMI.

IH: Was it Defense Equal Opportunity . . .

JWB: Management Institute.

IH: Yes, I meant the DRRI.

JWB: DRRI was the predecessor to DEOMI, and it was done with a full recognition that it is something you cannot put your head in the sand. You got a problem, you got to deal with it. In 1973, the chief of staff of the Army, Creighton Abrams, required every general officer to attend a 3 day, 18 hour seminar on race relations - every one of them. And while I was visiting Washington, I bumped into the Chief and I made the comment, "Sir, you don't expect me to go, do you?" And he said, "Becton, I am going to be there and so are you." "Yes, sir." That is how serious he took the matter.

IH: O.K.

JWB: When I was a division commander, I required all my incoming battalion commanders, brigade commanders, and air command sergeant majors to attend a brief abbreviated program at DEOMI at Patrick Air Force Base. I laid out with the

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commandant what I wanted my people to do and what I wanted them to learn. He agreed with it and my idea was to get them sensitized to the issues. And it paid off.

IH: So, that averted a lot of racial tension that could have otherwise happened, correct?

JWB: Well, that but also I wanted them to be sensitive to the fact that there are issues and I realize there are people who, because of their assignments, their culture, their upbringing, may not have been aware of it, not being able to see it. But once you laid out for them and then tell what you expect, they had no excuse. And of the group that I sent down there, and I must have sent 15 or more people, every one when they came back, they were sensitized and did well except one and one colonel who I sent to DEOMI, I got a call from the commandant who said something to the effect, "This guy has got a problem." And sure enough, he did not do well in command.

IH: What part of the country was he from? Any recollection? Was he from the south?

JWB: I have no idea. I found out it had very little to do . . . when they get to be a colonel, where you are born had nothing to do with his performance. But I found some racists just as much from New York City and Philadelphia as I found from Montgomery, Alabama.

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IH: Yes, sometimes up north, they are even worse. O.K. Before we go, can you talk about your command experience with 7th Corps in Germany? About what that was like?

JWB: Well, I was commander of 7th Corps from October of 1978 until June of 1981. That happened to have been the longest command I had and also the longest assignment except for ROTC duty. It was the largest combat command in the Army. We are part of that group that "won the Cold War." It was probably the most satisfying command I have ever had, primarily because we had a large number of people - 88,000 soldiers, 72,000 family members, 22,000 civilian workers. I was under the command of some very fine people and they let us do what we had to do. And I am receiving, even to this day, a reflection of what we did back in that period.

IH: Fantastic.

JWB: Did I send you or did you hear I am receiving the Marshall Award?

IH: The Marshall Award?

JWB: I guess you did not see it.

IH: I have this one you are getting for . . .

JWB: I will email it to you.

IH: I have it, the George Catlett Marshall medal, and (inaudible) award presented by the Association of the United States Army. Correct? I have that right here in my hand.

JWB: Much of that is a function of what I was able to do as a senior officer in the Army, plus service after the Army. But that came about as a result of what we were able to do in Germany. The Army symposia for families that was started in 7th Corps. The (inaudible) _____ of men and women together. We started that in 1st _____ Division Fort Hood and again in Germany. The deployment of women throughout the battle area, we did it in 7th Corps, and we had excellent German-American relations throughout the command, so much so that even today, the former mayor of Stuttgart over Bergemeister, his name is Manfred Rommel, the son of the Desert Fox, and I communicate quite regularly.

IH: Wow that is interesting.

JWB: And from that command came about 3 chiefs of staff of the Army, 1 chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, 5 or 6 "saints" - that is, combatant commanders of NATO and also in Pacific, and the satisfaction of knowing that we developed friends that are lifetime friends.

IH: O.K. Now, as 7th Corps commander, is that just one step below usareur commander?

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JWB: Yes, usareur has two corps, 5th Corps and 7th Corps.

IH: I forgot about 5th Corps. Now, still thinking about 7th Corps but I did not have this question on the questionnaire I emailed you. I have gotten into a discussion with professors in the past. They study Cold War history and things like that. And one of them mentioned that . . . I am not saying this because I was there. I have a similar perspective of the threat. But a lot of them are saying now that the Soviet Union was a paper tiger, that they never really were a threat and when I was there, I never thought that. You know, we had the smell them cards, we had alerts and everything. For those historians and, again, I call them . . . some of them try to be just armchair diplomats but what would you say to those historians who make the claim that the Soviet Union was never really a threat and they tried to drum it up to keep the Defense industry going after 1975?

JWB: What would I say to them?

IH: Yes.

JWB: I would ignore them. They don't know what the hell they are talking about. The nuclear weapons that the Soviet Union had pointed towards us were real. So were the nuclear weapons we had pointed towards them. The borders were controlled, patrolled, man, barbed wire, mines, machine guns, towers. Those were not imagined. They were real. The people who crossed from East Berlin to West Berlin and got shot, very real.

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The armor units that the Soviet Union could have thrown at us and our effort to exercise against them was very real. So, no one that I know of has ever mentioned . . . I do not recall ever hearing an historian tell me that they were a facade.

IH: They are out there, I assure you. I am not one of them.

JWB: You may have heard that. I spent 5 years as president of a university and my historians never mentioned it to me. I spent time in the Atlantic Council Foundation, the George Marshall Foundation, the Center for Strategic International Studies, and I could go on and on in groups that I have been with and worked with and I have not heard a credible academician mention that.

IH: Yes, I wish I could say the same but I have had adamant disagreements with them about that and I said, O.K., we agreed to disagree but I didn't see it that way because I was there.

JWB: Ask them if they have been there, if they have seen the border.

IH: What do you feel was the turning point in the Cold War?

JWB: The turning point in the Cold War?

IH: Yes.

JWB: I cannot name any particular significant point except when our president told Mr. Gorbachev, "Take down that wall." Also, when the Berlin Wall first went up, we made it a point that we were going to continue to supply the forces in West Berlin and we did, and we were willing to play the game tit-for-tat. They did something along the border, we retaliated. And I am sure the Soviet Union were keenly aware of what we had to defend western Europe. Sure, they could have kicked us out but they would have paid a horrendous price to do that, both on the front lines and also, their major cities because we had the air power to do exactly that.

IH: O.K., great.

JWB: As a matter of fact, when I was the 7th Corps commander, my Air Force counterpart that commanded the aircraft that would support us, a black American, lieutenant general.

IH: O.K. Well, I am going to stop the tape recorder now.