

Interviewee: Berry, James

Interview: June 27, 2007

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

Interview with: Colonel James Berry

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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

Topic: Black Officers, Vietnam, HBCU

IH: O.K. Today's date is 6/27/07. I am interviewing Colonel James Berry at his home. You are in D.C., correct?

JB: No, I am in Springfield, Virginia

IH: Oh, I am sorry. Springfield, Virginia. I stand corrected. Colonel Berry, can you tell me what is your date of birth?

JB: I was born July 10, 1951.

IH: And where are you from originally?

JB: I am from east Texas.

IH: What town is that?

JB: My home town is Lovelady, Texas.

IH: Lovelady, Texas. O.K. Can you tell me about what it was like growing up in the 1950s and 1960s with the Civil Rights era and stuff going on like that?

JB: I grew up in a small country town in east Texas, segregated south. I grew up with the segregated elementary school, junior high and high school. In fact, I was the last class to graduate from the all black school in 1969 when I graduated high school. I grew up on a farm, so my family was mostly away from the Civil Rights demonstrations that were going on in cities. We did not have a lot of that going on in our hometown, but there were some that went on. I remember when the colored signs were torn down from the rear of the Dairy Queen and people started to park in the front. I remember all of the signs of colored drinking fountains, colored restrooms, white only restrooms, white only drinking fountains. And a cousin of mine, we were both reminiscing this past weekend about both of us getting run off of a soda fountain uptown in the little town we went to on Saturdays in Crockett, Texas. That was the county seat when we went to town on Saturdays. We both remember being told, "You can't sit at this particular place," just trying to get an orange drink and sitting down. But that was the rural south. I never took part in any Civil Rights demonstrations or anything like that. My parents kept us pretty close to the farm. We did get out but there was nothing like that going on, no kind of demonstrations or anything going on in my particular life at the time.

IH: O.K. Do you have any recollection of your grandparents and maybe some of the things that they instilled in you as a young man that you carried on into adulthood?

JB: Well, one of the things that is kind of unique about myself and my younger brother is that I had one grandparent that I remember. By the time he came along, he was senile, so he was somebody that we did not . . . he stayed with us periodically, we saw him almost every day but he could not share anything like that with us. I have no recollection of the closeness of a grandparent as a child. That is something that me and my baby brother did not have.

IH: O.K., now coming up as a young man, did you have fill-in role models or anything like that which was critical to you, maybe some uncles or pastors or anything?

JB: Oh, my role models were father and mother. Daddy was a cotton farmer and he had 5 boys and 2 girls. We worked hard on the farm. It was our farm and that was our job, to get that. I had a mother who was a schoolteacher and educator, so she instilled the value of education in us. My father, a farmer and a carpenter, instilled the value of hard work and getting things done. So, we had a good combination of education and hard work. I had 3 uncles that were members of the military and participated in World War II, and played significant roles in the military in World War II. And, you know, kind of were a good influence on us deciding what I wanted to do at some point in time.

IH: O.K. So, they had a big influence on you wanting to become an officer?

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JB: Well, I don't know if I wanted to become an officer, but just the attractiveness maybe of the military. Two uncles were in Germany, were part of the D-Day . . . not D-Day but the fight across Europe after D-Day invasion. One uncle used to tell us about him running the ports at Cherbourg after the taking of the Cherbourg Peninsula. Another uncle talked to us quite a bit, reminiscing about his fighting. He was an infantry man in Europe, crossing the Rhine River. Another uncle was in the Navy and talked about his experience on the ship. (Inaudible)_____ spotting a mine before it hit the ship. So, those guys . . . we started to learn about that growing up and that kind of helped shape us as kind of the adventure and the excitement of being in the military.

IH: So, coming up in the 1960s, again, we had the Civil Rights Movement and things like that happening. What were your impressions of figures like Mohammad Ali and Malcolm X, Huey Newton, things like that?

JB: I have no recollection of Huey Newton when I was growing up. I started to learn about Huey Newton once I got to Prairie View in the 1960s, late 1960s, early 1970s. Mohammad Ali was a great hero of ours in high school. I remember sitting out in the car at night. That is the only way we could get a radio station was sitting in the car . . . when he would fight, and listened to his fights at night. It was great excitement just to hear him talk and hear him talk about what he was going to do. And I would see him on Wide World of Sports on Saturday afternoons, his interviews with Howard Cosell. We greatly admired Mohammad Ali. Malcolm X, no recollection of Malcolm X as I was growing up. I really did not. Martin Luther King, we heard about. I was a junior in high school

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the night he was killed. And I remember my father's reaction to that. I still remember that to this day. My father's reaction to the news break that came on that night we were sitting in the living room - my dad, my younger brother, and I and my mother. It was the night Martin Luther King was killed. That was a great shock.

IH: What was your father's reaction to that?

JB: Oh, he just say, "Oh, uh-oh." Something really bad had happened. I think up until then, we had only seen Martin Luther King on television, were not directly involved in his Civil Rights activities in east Texas. Those large demonstrations, we had no participation in. Most of the things that happened around there, what happened up in the town, we did not have the opportunity to participate in those things in the city.

IH: For some of the figures I mentioned, one would be Tommy Smith as well and Jim Brown, Thurgood Marshall, just to name a few -- maybe the years before PV when you are like 18 or 19, 17, did you have any figures that represented masculinity to you, especially the ones I mentioned or maybe some different figures?

JB: The figures that represented masculinity to me were the people in my immediate family and my extended family -- my father was probably the most influential; my uncle, my father's brother, my mother's brothers and all of those older gentlemen around in the community there. I think you have got to understand that growing up in a rural community, you do not have a lot of outlets, have a lot of exposure except for those

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people that help shape your lives in that community. It does not mean that you grew up in a capsule, in a restricted environment but my father took us on vacations in the summer time, took us to baseball games because he was a baseball player himself and almost made it into the all Negro league as a bat catcher. So, he and his brothers all played baseball. So, that was always great community involvement, the boys in the community. They took us in the summer time and when school was out after the crops were all cultivated and things like that, before school got started, they bought us baseball equipment and we played baseball in the community. So, those were the mentors. And your school teachers, your agriculture teachers, and your football coaches. Those were the people that shaped you. So, I have to say your father, your uncles and your cousins and your older brothers and your teachers - those people in the community shape your lives more than anything else, in my area where I grew up.

IH: O.K. Was there any particular advice that your father gave you that was kind of like a template that helped guide you through the military, through college and through life in general?

JB: Well, I think the template that Daddy probably implanted on all of us -- I have 6 brothers and sisters -- is that, you know, be proud of what you have, be proud of what your family has done and the things that you build on your own. Buying a farm, paying a farm as my mother and father did. Raising crops every year to take care of your family. Sending 6 children to college and most of us graduated from college. You know, you are doing that at the time when you did not have loans really available to black students.

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Your parents did all that, just from their hard work and sacrifice. So, Daddy instilled in us the appreciation of education. My father only went to the 8th grade but he appreciated the need for good education. He was very good at math. He could figure the circumferences and the material for any building that he was required to build, figure the labor and all of the things that he needed to put that building together, to get the elevation correctly on rafters and pitching the roof. He knew how to do all that with an 8th grade education. You learn to appreciate that, what an individual like that does for himself and how he applies all of that based on very limited formal education. He always told us, "I always worked to make life for all of you all." That is what stayed with all of us, I think.

IH: O.K. That is impressive. So, upon finishing high school, how did you make it to PV and did you have some other choices or was PV the place you wanted to go?

JB: The golden rule in my family - we were expected, it was understood that you were going to go on to college after high school and that was our next step after high school. That is the next step that most of us . . . O.K., now we are out of high school, the next step is Prairie View. There were not many other considerations. I thought about West Point once. Never attempted it. The only reason I thought about it was because the guy that I knew, one of my cousins, had gone up and attempted it and he had let it go after one year. So, I thought about it but, New York, way up there, I just said, well, I will head on down to Prairie View where everybody else went.

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IH: So, during that time, my understanding was that since it was a land grant school, that ROTC was mandatory for the first two years.

JB: Mandatory. That is correct.

IH: During this time, what were your feelings about Vietnam? I mean, although you wanted to go to college, did you look at it as a way, well look, I can get my education then go to Vietnam later?

JB: Vietnam was on people's minds every day because it was on TV every day. It was constantly on the air, constantly in the news and constantly in front of you. My oldest sister had gotten married while she was at Prairie View and her husband, after they got married; he went almost immediately to Vietnam. So, she was a war bride. I remember her sitting watching TV and turning the TV off and not wanting to watch it because she would hear about a particular incident and lots of soldiers got killed and she could not tell whether her husband was in that operation or not. So, great an agony. There was always concern. My parents were always concerned for her and for their son-in-law over there. But it was something that you kind of expected to see because every class that graduated ahead of you had guys to go over. I was in a small town, all black school and one thing you got in that town was the senior year, they took all the guys and took them down to Houston to the induction center and gave us physicals. That was your senior trip almost! So, it was one of those things that they started to implant in you, you know, that you are going to get ready to go to the Army after this is over with and that let

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you know, you know, that if you do not do something else after high school, you are going to go into the Army because you already had your physical and all and the local draft boards controlled your life if you did not go on to college.

I remember very, very clearly when I turned 18 years old, I came back from Prairie View that summer, my father took me up to a local draft board in Houston County seat up there in Crockett, Texas. He took me in and said, "Well, I brought my son up to register for the draft." I remember him telling the guys at the board, "Well, you know, he is in college now and I hope he can make it through and get his education." I never heard anything else from the local draft board. I had 4 other brothers that went through college during that Vietnam area and none of us were ever drafted out of college to go into the Army.

IH: That is great.

JB: And I think it was because of the standing that my father and my mother had in the community. People knew them, respected them, and they knew we were going on to try to better ourselves.

IH: O.K. Let me ask you, when did you start PV?

JB: 1969.

IH: So, this was after Tet?

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JB: Vietnam was hot but I think Tet was 1968.

IH: So, you are in the midst of the Black Power Movement and, you know, civil rights is . . .

JB: We were always very conscious of that. I remember as an ROTC cadet, probably as about a junior or senior, a white general officer coming down to review the Corps cadets in that area. It was our annual award ceremony. I remember asking them a very pointed question about reports that black soldiers were being killed at a higher percentage, at a higher rate than other soldiers because they were walking point more, leading patrols more and getting out in the front areas where you were going to be shot, you were going to be the first one to be taken out. So, I asked it. That was on my mind so I asked about it. You got Life Magazine quite a bit. There was a cover story . . . I wish I could find that cover of Ebony Magazine years ago.

IH: Was it called The Black Soldier?

JB: I think it was.

IH: I have it.

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JB: Yes, there are several black soldiers just walking in a squad and right up front, this guy, you know . . . and they just had him right up front.

IH: Do you remember the general's reaction when you asked him that?

JB: Well, I do not know. The general officer probably gave me . . . well, I do not remember his answer. I really do not remember his answer. I will not attempt to try to say what he said.

IH: I am sure it was politically correct.

JB: It was a politically correct response.

IH: So, did you ever question, say, well, look, I am going to be commissioned as a United States Army officer -- however, blacks, here, my people, we still do not have equal civil and social rights, so why am I going to fight these folks over here possibly when the fight is still here? Did you ever have thoughts like that?

JB: I never had those feelings because of the conditions in the United States. My position was that I am going to be an officer and I am going to try to be the best one I can because the officers and the instructors that we had at Prairie View instilled that in us. They let you know, "You are going to be in platoons with all white officers and they are not going to like you, officers are not going to like you, but you have got to go out there and treat people as you want to be treated and as you expect to be treated and just do your

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job." I think most of us - I won't say every one of us - I think most of us left Prairie View with that attitude and you went out and did the absolute best that you could.

IH: Do you feel that graduating from an HBCU gave you something, a traditionally white ROTC program or OCS could not have given you?

JB: Oh, I think so, yes. I think you had examples of the people that had gone before you. They brought back in guys like Julius Becton. They brought Julius Becton back to the campus every year. Every time I had seen Julius Becton, he had been promoted to another rank. The first time I saw him, he was a lieutenant colonel. The last time I saw him, he was a one star general. That was before I left Prairie View. I never served with him once I left Prairie View but I would run into him periodically. He finally retired as a three star.

IH: He is a great guy to interview as well.

JB: But those guys always presented a great example and a great role model for us. We really looked up and looked at the ROTC instructors down at Prairie View as great role models - people that we wanted to be like.

IH: Is there anything else that the HBCU might have . . . did they give you any type of, well, I am sure it was not formal training but any type of advice about how to handle

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racial tension and some things that you could run up against as a black officer?

JB: I do not remember ever getting any training on how to handle racial situations, not at Prairie View. We might have. I do not remember it. They threw you in with everybody else. I am going to tell you, I think the first time I ever had a conversation, a meaningful conversation with a white guy, was when I was a junior in college and I landed at summer camp at Fort Riley, Kansas. I was 20 years old, and I had never had a meaningful conversation with any white guy, any white person. Growing up in the rural south, you would talk to white guys all the time but there are not very many. They just did not . . . it was a segregated town. We lived on our own farm so we did not have to interface with people. We worked on our own farm, so I did not work for anybody but my father. There was a little guy that had the store, you know, he grew up with all of us and we knew him but we did not have meaningful conversation with him other than riding horses and running cows. But when I got to Fort Riley, Kansas, the summer of 1970, 1971, 1972, I think, and I got thrown in there with 40 or 50 other guys, we were just all there. I remember almost getting into a fight and the guy that was backing me up was a guy from Notre Dame. I never met him before in my life.

IH: A white guy?

JB: A white guy from Notre Dame. He and I and I guess some other redneck. That is just the way it was. My best friend is from the camp that summer. He and I hit it off and

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we made it together. It was a guy from the University of Houston. We ended up running into each other several times and ended up at Fort Bragg together our first assignment and later on as field grade officers back there again on our second assignment. But he and I . . . I just remember nights we bunked together, slept together all the time. I remember nights laying in sleeping bags in a pup tent and he and I lying up there just carrying on conversations just like we were childhood friends.

IH: That is great.

JB: Now, I think the formative years . . . nobody told me I could be anything I wanted to but just being confident in yourself, confident in your abilities and confident in what you could do, just allowed you to go in and just, hey, I am just a regular guy here, I am just a soldier here competing with everybody else. Thank God, I can compete with everybody else. You did not have any other way. I did not look at it any other way.

IH: Now, upon leaving Prairie View and receiving your commission, did you have any anxiety or anything about kind of like a resocialization program, you coming from an HBCU but then you go into a predominantly white army? Some of the guys I have talked to said the first couple of days, they felt kind of strange with that. I mean, I know segregation was over by that time.

JB: You feel strange because most of the time, you are the only black officer in your unit. You have a lot of NCOs. You have a lot of black NCOs. And they took you under

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their wing. And they helped mold you and helped shape you, helped build you up and helped complete you as an officer. They told you what to do and what not to do. They took you under their wings and they helped you because they wanted you to succeed. The black NCOs wanted to see you succeed and they helped you succeed. You would go in with your company commander as a platoon leader, as a second lieutenant with your company commander and the other platoon leaders. They were all white. The commander was white. The executive officer was white. And, you know, you just went in and jumped in and worked hard, took the jobs and did whatever they required you to do. You could not stand around and feel sorry for yourself because you thought you were black and you had not gotten all of the advantages of everybody else. You went in with what you had and did the best you could. That is the attitude that I took.

IH: O.K. That is a good attitude. Was there any particular NCO, either your platoon sergeant or first sergeant were one of the ones that kind of took you under their wing and stuff like that and told you what to watch out for, that kind of thing?

JB: Yes, that is right. My first, second day there, my first sergeant grabbed me. "Lieutenant, come here. I am going to tell you where to go. You need to take your uniform down to the PX, get them starched every day, take your boots down there and drop them off every day because I know you do not know how to shine your boots." I was in the 82nd Airborne Division, you have got to understand - that was the mentality.

IH: O.K. That was your first . . .

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JB: That was my first assignment. You wore spit shined boots every day. You wore starched fatigues every day. He said, "I know you don't know how to spit shine boots so take them down to PX, drop them off every night and get your other pair and pick them up, wear those, and you do it every day." Broke starch and spit shined boots every day. Those guys helped you understand what you had to do. "Report to formation every day on time. Don't be going downtown drinking late, getting up, thinking you can stagger in here at 7:30 when the formation is at 7. That is not going to be acceptable. Those other guys might be able to get away with it but you are not going to be able to get away with it." The NCOs start to instill that in you. And I would be standing there on Monday morning at 7 o'clock and I had other platoon leaders show up late, the company commander showed up late routinely. But nothing ever happened to him. If you watched some of the early coverage in Desert Storm, a guy who was a three star general, Scott Wallace, he was the commanding general of the 7th Corps that led the initial charge into Baghdad. That was my company commander in the 82nd Airborne Division. He was the captain when I was a second lieutenant. He was late for formation every Monday morning.

IH: I guess he made some improvements over the years.

JB: Yes, well, he was West Point. And one thing about my initial assignment in the Army - almost every officer in that battalion was a West Point graduate. There were a

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few of us that were ROTC graduates but the vast majority were West Point. That is what you were competing against.

IH: O.K. Can you talk about that? From the research I have done, I have seen that a lot of the West Pointers, they get some of the best assignments so obviously, you were at a real good assignment there. Did you ever notice any type of special treatment West Pointers may have gotten or opportunities to shine . . .

JB: Oh, yes. They always got first consideration for the plum jobs. When you came in the 82nd Airborne Division, all West Pointers were put down on what they called, at the platoon leader level of service. You went down to that platoon and you learned how to be a rifle platoon leader, a tank platoon leader or a field artillery section leader or whatever they were called in field artillery -- whatever the premium jobs for second lieutenants were, West Pointers got them. I went in as a second lieutenant also and I was put in as a tank platoon leader. Same job, you know, but I was commissioned in the regular army and most officers that came out of ROTC were not commissioned in the regular army.

IH: O.K., so you were commissioned in the regular army?

JB: I was commissioned in the regular army. I had the same commission as the West Pointers had.

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IH: Were you DMG?

JB: I was Distinguished Military Graduate. I was number 2. I was the number 2 cadet at the University when I graduated.

IH: O.K., there it is. I knew those guys always got an RA commission.

JB: Yes, you got a regular army commission, myself and another guy, and Cornelius Easter.

IH: O.K. That is fantastic. So, you are in the 82nd. When you first went in in 1973, what do you think was the percentage of black enlisted in your company?

JB: Oh, black enlisted in my company was probably, 82nd Airborne Division was probably 55%.

IH: Was there a black subculture going on there?

JB: Oh, yes, especially with the NCO Corps. There definitely was. That happened a little bit in the platoons, a little bit in the companies. You could recognize it and I had to get on one of my buck sergeants one day when he called a white guy a name, because it was a derogatory name. I got on him real quick. I had him understand that I do not tolerate any of that. So, that was a subculture there. If you allowed it to fester, it would

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break out into the unit and people would start choosing sides. I witnessed one morning on the drop zone a fight between NCOs when one of the NCOs excuse themselves from the company, went out into the woods and myself and Scott Wallace - he is a four star now - and all the other platoon leaders and the company commander stood there on the drop zone, twiddled our thumbs until the NCOs went out there and settled their problem. And they came back . . . it was a senior black NCO and a white junior NCO. He had been having problems out of that guy, just problems like . . . this junior white NCO was just not going to adhere to what this black senior NCO wanted him to do, so they went out there in the woods and settled it. They came back, all the NCOs came back, never heard anything else from there. That was life in the 82nd Airborne Division back then.

IH: O.K., so you guys took a hands-off approach to let them handle . . .

JB: The officers stood back. Have you ever seen the old movie, "She Wore A Yellow Ribbon," when John Wayne went out there and the sergeant major says, "This is an NCO fight," or "NCO business," whatever? And the colonel walked away from it.

IH: O.K. That is pretty interesting. So, this was common? That was the way that it was handled?

JB: That wasn't common but it happened. I have seen it before. I saw it at least twice when I was in the 82nd.

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IH: Can you recollect any other experience of racial tension that you had during this part of your career?

JB: No racial tension. Everybody understood . . . we had to go down into Georgia periodically. Right now, there is a big military base down there, Fort Stewart. But we would go down in there periodically to shoot tank gunnery. Fort Stewart was not nearly as big as it is now -- little old town of Hindsville and Claxton, Georgia. Claxton, Georgia is the fruit cake capital of the world and also probably at the time, was probably one of the Klan capitals of Georgia. There were times when the 82nd Airborne Division would go down there and doing things around that place and you would get into problems. I never encountered any but you had to be very, very careful down there. This was military against civilian. That is really what that was. It probably started as racial within the little area but when this happened to an 82nd Airborne soldier, it became black and white soldier against redneck town. But, you know, I have to say that I never truly witnessed a single racial incident at Fort Bragg, North Carolina or any other place that I think I have served. But there were periodic flare-ups. Some guys just, liquor gets to talking to them or something like that and they just get angry and things flare up.

IH: Did you have any soldiers in your company during this time period that were wearing Afros or maybe would give you the Black Power salute?

JB: No, you did not do the Black Power salute in the 82nd Airborne Division. Your soldiers would beat you. It was understood in an Airborne unit that you do not do things like that. But, you know, we wore Afros. I took a picture at Fort Knox, Kentucky with

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my Afro to be the model and I was the second lieutenant. It was a type of Afro that was acceptable. Even in an Airborne assignment, I did not wear my hair as high and tight as these people wear it now. We just did not do that. So, you know, we wore Afros but we did not . . . some guys still wore that little . . . some things around their neck. A lot of guys in the 82nd at that time were Vietnam veterans. You went into units there that all of the NCOs . . . I would not say all of them but 90% of the NCOs were Vietnam veterans. Some of the junior enlisted were Vietnam veterans that just had not been promoted. They just had been in trouble and they had been busted. But a lot of people were Vietnam veterans there, so they still had remnants in Vietnam. It was the mid 1970s, the early 1970s, so the Afro was still in style. But you had to have it shaped at a certain level and a certain length.

IH: Were the enlisted still dapping and doing things like that?

JB: Yes, they would dap but you did not see a lot of that like you have seen on shows . . . the guys in the jungle in Vietnam sit there and dap for 5 minutes. You did not see that kind of stuff.

IH: So, I guess, throughout your career, how long were you in? Thirty years?

JB: I went 28 years.

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IH: So, throughout your career, you did not run into any problems of whites having a black figure of authority over them or anything like that?

JB: You know, nobody ever voiced it to me. There might have been some. You had guys from all over the United States, in the Deep South. But I never, ever had a single time when one of my soldiers even attempted to disobey an order from me or disobey a directive, like they were not going to respond to me because I was a black officer. You know, you were the lieutenant, you were the captain. What the lieutenant says or the captain says, O.K., we have got to do it.

IH: O.K. Now, during your free time as far as socializing, did you socialize more with blacks or with whites?

JB: Oh, I think in your free time, you drifted to the black officers in the unit. There were several of us there that came in there together and you tended to go with those guys in social settings but I will tell you, the first time I set up house in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, it was with a white officer from West Point. We met at division headquarters at 82nd Airborne Division, at what they called the assignments branch where the guys say, "O.K., you are going to this unit. You are going to this unit." We were second lieutenants right out of Airborne school. And he and I met, ended up going to the same unit, same battalion. And we got down there even though we went to different companies, when we got ready to, say, "O.K., you guys go find somewhere to go, somewhere to live," he said, "Hey, we both are going to be coming here every morning,

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let's get us a place to live." So, I said, "Yes, let's go. Let's go." So, we went out that day and found a place and stayed together for probably about 1 year. He got married and he moved out. Like I said, we met at division headquarters that Monday morning. Never seen each other before in our lives. But we had something in common - we were Airborne troopers with the 82nd Airborne Division and an Army battallion, you know, learning how to be first lieutenants. Fresh lieutenants out of college and officers basics.

IH: Tell me about the promotion system and the OERs. From more research, a lot of the black officers were receiving low OERs, not necessarily low but they usually came up 10 points behind their white contemporaries. Can you talk about your experience with the OERs and the early years?

JB: Yes, in the early years, the OERs, they sucked. I don't think any lieutenant in the 82nd Airborne Division got very high OERs. Maybe some of the guys did but I did not. That was just (inaudible) . . . and they told you, "Lieutenants are not perfect." Scott Wallace told me that. But I survived it. Once you made first lieutenant, your OERs got better and you start to learn, you start to appreciate the fact that you could talk to your boss about, well, you know, I thought I did better doing this and we did this and did this, and sometimes they would change it. I had guys change it on the spot. "Yes, you are right," and just brought it up another point or something like that. That and I just like to think the work that I did every day allowed me to stay in the upper third of the people that I was competing against.

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IH: Did you actually get to see your OERs or would they just tell you?

JB: Well, one or two times, you would just call down and just get it. I had one company commander just call down and gave it to me. He did not like me, I did not like him, so we were just glad to be away from each other. That was the second commander I had. My platoon sargeant used to tell me to watch him because he almost definitely showed favoritism. So, I was just glad to get away from that, moved on and did something else. I have not looked back at him, and what he did had no impact on me.

IH: So, they never gave you any type of formal counseling on OERs . . .

JB: Back then, you did not do a lot of counseling. You got your OER at the end of the rating period. That is before they started to put a lot of emphasis on counseling. You worked every day and at the end of the time, you sat down and they gave you the official report. O.K. And if it was bad, probably people did something with it. Some people were expecting it to be perfect every time. I do not think I ever got a perfect official report until I made captain. And then you started to get better and better. So, by the time I got to be a senior captain, they were top notch all the time. And from that to field grade officer, then you start to stay at a very high rating -- perfect scores or right at just below. That kept you in the upper percentile from your group.

IH: Now, when you became a commander, like at the field grade level, did you notice any problems with inflation with the OERs?

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JB: Oh, yes. The OERs were always inflated badly, and that is why if you are a good officer, they have to put you up high, they have to keep you up near perfect or just right below it. If you go down two, you are killed - you were in bad shape. Fortunately, even all of the years that I went through, I managed to keep my ratings up high most of the time because you met all the gates. You knew you were being competitive because you met all the gates that were expected of the lieutenant colonel and colonel.

IH: I wanted to ask you about CGSC, Command General Staff College -- what rank were you when you went to that school?

JB: I was a major.

IH: So, would you say, and this is something I am still researching, that you needed those higher OERs or trend of high OERs and potential to get chosen for that school?

JB: Oh, yes. If you were just running with the pack, you did not get to Leavenworth. You had to be in the upper third.

IH: So, are there ever any captains that go to that college?

JB: Oh, yes. You get selected for Leavenworth . . . you first look for Leavenworth to a commanding staff college is when you get selected for major, for field grade officer.

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And once you get selected for field grade officer, there is a board that meets very, very shortly after that to start to consider you for Commanding Staff College. So, most of us, most officers that came out of our ROTC even though you are pretty high in your class, you got selected for Leavenworth on your second look. When the major's list came out, you were on the major's list, you got promoted on time, you got selected on time. When the Leavenworth list came out, I was not on it the first time around. I was very disappointed. The major list came out in the summer of 1984. I was on the major's list my first look, my first primary zone look. I was selected in October of 1985 . . . [end of side 1]

JB: So, that was my first look at Leavenworth. It was after I had been selected for major. I did not get selected the first time around. The next year, you go back into the hopper and you are looked at, you are looked at for Commander Staff College every year that you are eligible, and the second year, I popped on it. I would wager to say that 70% of officers are selected on that second look.

IH: O.K., now when you were the rating officer once you were major and colonel, lieutenant colonel, how did you evaluate your subordinates? What was a common thing of how you evaluated them?

JB: I think you evaluate them on initiative, how well they operate, how well they carry out the guidance that you give them, how well they treat their people, how well they maintain their equipment, how well they care for their people and their family members.

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Just the care they put in and the quality of time they put in and just doing their job. Guys who were 9 to 5 did not fare very well probably. But you had to show some dedication to what we were doing.

IH: In your opinion, what were the biggest weaknesses of the OERs?

JB: It was just so subjective, I think. These numbers were so subjective. I think the numbers were between 97 and 100 - I do not remember - but 97 could be the kiss of death but that was very high. That was a high number. But 100, you were always trying to get 100 or 200, whatever it added up to be. And the OERs, you had so many that you were trying to do and you are trying to rate people. That was before they had Profile. But I think it was just a subjective evaluation of just a number system.

IH: I have talked to, I do not know how many colonels at this time, and everyone has said the same thing - they were just too subjective. Were there any particular strategies that you developed to become an effective leader? I mean, obviously you did because you made it to the rank of colonel, but anything in particular that you would impress upon your junior officers?

JB: The strategy that I think any officer has to take is that you just have to work hard at what you do. You take the opinion that the Army selected you to do this and you have got to get up every day with the confidence in yourself that you can figure out some way that you are going to do it because I will tell you, when I got selected to come to the

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Pentagon, it scared me to death. Every day you walked in the Pentagonk you got a sick feeling in your stomach. But you went in it, you sucked it up and you went it in every day. People threw things at you every day. You walked out of a meeting and you said how in the world am I going to handle this? You go back, take a breath, and you start to work. So, you have to have some confidence in yourself that you can figure this out. You have to have the ability to reach out to other people because you do not know everything and there is somebody that knows what about what you can do. So, a lot of faith in a higher power, too, I will tell you that. Lord, give me strength to figure this out. Help me get through this.

IH: So, your duty at the Pentagon was not that enjoyable at times?

JB: Well, you know, duty at the Pentagon is, for me, probably was not enjoyable but it was incredibly beneficial. You learned so much there in 3 years that you do not learn in the rest of the Army. You learn how the Army operates and how the big picture all comes together and what part you play in it and what part all of these other people play in it. You get an education there that you get no other place. And if you survive that for 3 years, especially where we were, the location I was in the Pentagon, you almost could go anywhere and do anything. It was just like your formative years in 82nd Airborne Division. I used to tell anybody, "If you can last 4, 5 years in the 82nd Airborne Division, you can go anywhere and do anything."

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IH: O.K. You mentioned that someone always knows more than you. Did you have a particular mentor that helped you throughout your career?

JB: No particular mentor, no. Nobody that I could turn to at any time. Never had that. When you went to work, you learned from your bosses. Scott Wallace, I talk about him all the time. He was not a great mentor. You just worked for him and you went on but I know him. He and I see each other. If we see each other right now, you know, we will stop and talk. But wherever I went, there were people that we worked with or that you worked for, that you picked them, you got from them little things at the Pentagon. The guy that brought me to the Pentagon, I did not know him when he brought me there. He did not know me. He just saw my name and my record said, O.K., you are coming to the Pentagon once I graduated from Leavenworth. It was clearly on my record.

IH: What position did you have at the Pentagon?

JB: I worked on the Army staff, on what we called Army Deputy Chief of Staff of Operations. Army Desops. Force Development Directory. That was misery.

IH: It probably gave you some great exposure though, I am sure.

JB: Great exposure because that is where we outlined the future of the Army. That is where you fought the budget battles and the budget fights. I guess all the other services within the Army. Last man standing got the money and kept the programs alive and did all that interface with Congress and Office of the Secretary of Defense and all that other

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stuff to defend Army positions. You developed Army positions, you briefed it to the senior leadership of the army, and you went with them when they had to go to send it. They are sitting there talking, making points and issuing guidance and providing information to the senior leadership in the Department of Defense based on what you gave them. So, it was an incredibly tension-filled experience. But you learned so much up there and you get so much responsibility as a young officer there that it is just incredible. It is absolutely incredible. I walked the halls one day and just wondered, you know, how does this little boy from Loveladies get here doing this? You know, you had been there 30 days and you find yourself sitting in front of the chief of staff at the Army telling him, "This is the meeting you are going to. These are the points you have got to make. This is the Army position." And you developed that Army physician and staff it through all of the people to get to the Chief of Staff of the Army and you are sitting there advising him what to say when he gets there.

IH: So, if you had your choice between the Pentagon and troop time in the field, which one would you pick?

JB: Troop time, any day!

IH: From your experience in the Army, what do you feel was the biggest problem in the military in relation to being a person of color?

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JB: Being a person of color, I think the biggest problem was the white officers' lack of understanding and just lack of appreciation sometimes of what your abilities were, what your capabilities were. I think even more than that, you do not know much about each other, so there is a built-in distance because we have not associated with each other. A lot of times, white officers have not associated with black officers either. Those guys grew up with white roommates, white classmates, white friends, and going into the Army, white officers - they are all together. And a black officer shows up, they know nothing about you, do not know how to talk to you, they are very uncomfortable trying to talk to you, making small talk to you. That was always what used to frustrate me. My wife and I would go to a party, "Well, boy, I love Sammy Davis, Jr." And we had that stated to us. "I love Lou Rawls."

IH: Oh Lord!

JB: Rather than just coming up and talking to you about how is the community, how are you doing, how is your garden, how is your family, how is life back in . . . how are your parents? They just did a little small talk and after you got through telling who you were, "Well, I do not know much about Danny Thomas or Lou Rawls or anything like that," and you just drift on away from each other.

IH: If we do not have that in common, what more is probably what they thought.

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JB: Yes. I think that was the biggest thing I found. I never, ever allowed myself to think that I had less skills than these guys did because you could see it every day who the weak ones were and they stood out. And even the white officers knew who the weak and the strong ones were. I remember one time we were in Panama, the jungle school in Panama, we had one young black lieutenant in the battalion. There were three black officers in the battalion - myself, another captain and a second lieutenant. We had been out in this jungle for about 6 days and the battalion commander came in one night and he had been out evaluating his . . . I was a captain by then . . . he said, "Boy, the best lieutenant in this battalion is so and so," and it was this black second lieutenant from Alcorn University. He had been out there in that jungle and he had been tearing people up, threatening people with bodily harm. He really made an impression that night on that trip with the battalion commander. He was just a young wild kid from Alcorn University, a small town in Mississippi.

IH: Another HBCU. That is great. That is interesting. You said that the main thing you had to remember was hey, they are not better than you. I think that would go a long way.

JB: I never had any doubt that I could be an Army officer and perform at the level of all these other guys. Even though they had a lot more military training probably if you are a West Pointer or some other ROTC program, but you have to understand that Prairie View A&M's ROTC program in the 1970s was second only to Texas A&M. We were at

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military school. We wore a uniform 3 days a week down there, sometimes 4 if your classes fell wrong.

IH: O.K. We are coming up to our final question. What do you feel people need to know about African Americans in the military that has not been written or talked about, to your knowledge, that they need to know?

JB: That they need to know?

IH: Yes, or that they should know, or, I should say that maybe has not been written or talked about.

JB: I do not know if there is anything profound I can say but I think there are a lot of us that came into this with a great mental attitude, that we can do this, we enjoyed doing this, being an Army officer, we thought we could be good at it and we went about doing our work every day just as routine as anybody else to show that I can go as far as anybody else can go. You did not have to put on any special airs. You did not have to do anything illegal or improper to better yourself. You just had to prove yourself every day and a lot of us proved ourselves every day. I think most officers that made it, got up every morning, just put on their clothes and boots on and went out and did their job. Did their job. And when you saw people attempting to do something that was against your value system or against what you stood for, then you called them on it. I had been at the Pentagon two months, or about one month, my boss, the guy that brought me there, full

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colonel . . . I was a major, he was a full colonel . . . I got in my office, I was doing something and he just started cursing. He had cursed a white major out one time. I heard about it. He just started cursing. And I said, "Sir, you need to understand something. I am not going to sit here and be cursed at like that. You can put me back in the system and I will go on and make my way somewhere else but I am not going to sit here and listen to this." And when you establish yourself that way, you immediately gain their respect. He became probably my best mentor after that incident. And that is probably why I got to be the rank of O6, a large part because he took care of us that worked in that office at the Pentagon. He made sure that we were among the highest rated officers that the general rated, and the general had to rate a lot of officers. So, when you establish yourself and when you establish your credentials, what you stand for and what you are not going to stand for, I think you get a lot of respect - people start respecting you for who you are and what you had the potential of doing, because I did not have any great understanding of the Army before I went to the Pentagon (inaudible) Army brigade. Then, you go to the chief of staff. Then you go to the headquarters of the Army. So, there was a lot of distance in between that that I did not have any experience with.

IH: One question I forgot to ask you. You were in the Infantry branch or Army branch?

JB: Well, I was an Army officer when I first came in. I was commissioned as an Army officer. Then, after my two year commitment was up for that, I transitioned into military intelligence.

IH: O.K., you were MI.

JB: I was MI but during the Vietnam era, they were not going to commission you as a second lieutenant as a regular Army MI officer. You were going to go push the bush.

IH: Push the bush! O.K.

JB: I had to go do that.

IH: Push the bush. You know, that was about the smallest field for black officers, was MI.

JB: Oh, yes. There were not very many of us that were there. At one point in time, I was the only black MI officer in the 82nd Airborne Division. I can truthfully say that.

IH: That is amazing. So, I guess you were with a lot of, what were they, 96 bravos or something like that?

JB: Yes, there were a few 96 bravos. I was an officer of the 35 series. 96 was the enlisted series.

IH: Is the officer course for that in Fort Huachuca, Arizona?

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JB: I went to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, the summer of 1975.

IH: O.K. Yes, that is where I thought it was. Well, that actually concludes the interview. I want to thank you for the interview, Colonel.

