UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Major General Robert Gaskill
Interviewed by: Isaac Hampton II
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IH: Today's date is September 21, 2007. We are interviewing General Robert Gaskill at his home. General, can you give me your date of birth, please?

RG: 12 April 1931. Place of birth is Yonkers, New York, just north of the City.

IH: O.K. Now, you were raised in New York, in Yonkers?

RG: Just briefly. My dad moved the family from New York in 1937 - I was 6 years old - so I only completed kindergarten in New York. And then, I completed elementary school in Arlington, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C. And subsequent to that, I completed public school in Washington, D.C. The elementary school in Arlington was Kemper School. It was a 4 classroom school building set on a little hill. It has since been demolished and the area has been built up with residential development, and that school has been replaced by a much larger school named after Dr. Charles Drew, Drew Elementary School in Arlington.

IH: O.K. Can you talk a little bit about your family - your mother, your father, your grandparents - and what it was like coming up in the Jim Crow era?

RG: Well, the move to Arlington, Virginia, was a pivotal point for the family. The move was occasioned by my dad getting a clerical job in the Veterans Administration in Washington but he found a place for us to live in South Arlington, in a part of South Arlington known as Green Valley, a predominantly African American rural neighborhood. One of my earliest recollections was a discussion that my mother had on the bus, the Greyhound bus, coming down from New York. She explained to us that we were sitting on the back of the bus because that was the law in the southern part of the country and that we would experience segregated schools in Virginia and Washington as well, but that she was sure that we would adjust well, that it was important for us to get a good education by whatever means necessary.

Mother and Dad were both strong Christian parents and incidentally, when we moved from New York to Arlington, Virginia, my maternal grandmother, Mrs. Edith Fierce, came with us, and she lived with us until she passed away actually, many years later. At that time, I had 5 brothers and sisters, 2 sisters and 3 brothers. Dad had preceded us and my oldest brother who is now also deceased, had come down with the moving van. The balance of us came down on the Greyhound bus. We associated ourselves with the Lomax AME Zion Church, African/Methodist/Episcopal Zion Church, because my grandfather on my father's side had been a minister in that denomination. And so, my growing up years were centered mostly on work, going to school and church activities. The variety of youth for work included delivering newspapers, working in the corner grocery store, and later, being a bus boy and a waiter in restaurants and working

during the war in a cooperative gasoline station in Washington, D.C., which was located in the vicinity of what is now the famous Watergate Hotel.

IH: Oh, wow!

RG: There by the Kennedy Center near the Potomac River.

IH: Wow, O.K. Sticking with the early years, do you remember any conversations between your parents and grandparents about possibly them being descendants of slaves or anything like that?

RG: That is an interesting question. To answer your question directly, I would have to say, no, I do not remember any such discussion. I know that my mother was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and my father in Tarrytown, New York. All of the children in our immediate family were born in New York, with the exception of my youngest sister who was born in Kinston, North Carolina, and a few years ago in preparation for a family reunion, my wife did extensive research on our family, concentrating primarily on my father's side of the family but some research also on my mother's side, and she was not able to identify any specific linkage to any slave heritage because of the fire, and a couple of fires as a matter of fact, that destroyed some archival records, she had considerable difficulty in that research but at least on my father's side, my wife got back to a point where she identified a male member of the family that was taken in by an Indian family and at that point, the trail just stopped. So, again, the most direct answer I

can give you to your question is that we have not been able to establish any specific link to slavery.

IH: O.K. Now, coming up, do you remember anything specifically that your father or grandparents impressed upon you that you carried with you throughout your military career - that maybe helped drive you to reach the highest levels of the military which is general? Is there anything specific that might have talked about it?

RG: No, I think the two most important seeds that were planted in my mind were the importance of education and that included both secular education and religious education, Christian education, and the need for hard work, diligence in earning respect as a way of improving yourself or in your condition. He fell on a very limited education that he was able to acquire. To my knowledge, it did not include going much beyond the 8th grade but he was a very strong advocate of education as his father had been and he used to remind us whenever we had the inclination to complain about teachers, his comment would be along the lines, "Don't forget why you are going to school. You are going to school to learn. That is your most important job is to earn and earn as much as you can, as well as you can. And just remember who your teachers, who you might be inclined to criticize, they have their education and you have yours to get. So, get as much as you can from whatever teachers that you have.

As a matter of working diligently in order to earn respect and to earn your way in life, one of the clearest examples of that bit of counsel occurred when I was working in

that gasoline station and repair shop in Washington, that I mentioned earlier.

IH: Please say that story over.

RG: A family friend, Professor Fitzhugh at Howard University, had gotten me this part-time job and after working there for a couple of weeks, I came home and complained to my father that I did not understand why I had not been given the raise that I had been promised. He said, "Why do you think you deserve a raise?" I explained to him that that was the arrangement that I understood we had when I was hired, that I would get this raise at the end of 2 weeks, and his question was, "Well, why do you think you are worth more now than when you were hired?" I told him I did not understand that. What was important to me was that the manager had reneged on his promise. And he said, "Well, you know, when you have a job, you are expected to improve your performance and that is often the basis for an advancement." And he said, "What I suggest that you do is to think of ways that you can demonstrate that you are indeed more valuable to the company now than you were when you were hired 2 weeks ago and let's see what happens." I was still kind of disgruntled about that but I could not argue with his logic. And so, beginning the next week, I figured out some ways to do what he had suggested and I whitewashed the curbings of the gas station, I got there early and ensured that the restrooms were clean, that the floor was swept and mopped, that the place was generally . . . it looked better for my effort than it did before I exerted my effort, that I had water out on the island, that I had oil that was rationed at the time. In other words, I did as best I could what my father had suggested. And at the end of the

week, I was pleasantly surprised that I had the raise as well as a compliment from the manager. My father did not rub it in but he obviously was very pleased that I had paid some attention to his fatherly advice. That lesson has stuck with me over the years. It turned out to be great advice. That lesson was reinforced many times throughout my young schooling years within the segregated school system by thoughtful and caring teachers who would remind us as students that although the system, the social system, the educational system, indeed, the legal system of segregation was not fair but nevertheless, it was what we, at the time, needed to endure and worked as best we could within that system, that perhaps the best way to deal with it was to be as well-prepared educationally and morally as we could so that in the long run and perhaps in the short run as well, that we could advance our position by overwhelming the critics and those who opposed us with what they referred to as overwhelming excellence. The phrase was something like just be prepared to go through the doors that are open job-wise, education-wise, and do not shy away from the fact that you will probably have to be better than the competition in order to be considered and treated as equal. So, that turned out to be good advice in the military and otherwise, and I think the result has been progress in racial relations, especially in the job market.

IH: All right. Now, you came up during World War II, the end of it pretty much. Do you have any recollections of the Great Depression and FDR, World War II, what that was like as an African American coming up during that time?

RG: Well, you are right - I came up during at least part of the Great Depression. I was born in 1931. I did not realize at the time that I was living during the Depression. I learned about that through studying history subsequently. I do not ever remember going to bed hungry. Mother and Dad both worked, Dad at the Veteran's Administration and my mother and my grandmother both worked as housekeepers in white families' homes. During World War II after the Pentagon building and the Navy annex building in Arlington were built, many of the African American women and I guess many of the men also obtained laboring jobs as part of the custodial force in the Pentagon and the Navy annex, and my mother and grandmother were part of that force. I often reflected upon that later when I was assigned to the Pentagon building as an officer.

I remember fireside chats by President Roosevelt. I was not a great student of history or politics during that time but I do remember listening to him on the radio. We did not have television in those early days. As far as the war experience is concerned, my older brother and my oldest sister both volunteered and both served in the military, my brother in the Navy and my sister in the WAACs. My brother saw action in the Navy. My sister served in the Negro WAAC band for a brief period. She also saw service in England and France in an all African American postal unit. They were both very proud of their service. We were very proud of them. But as was the case with many of the veterans of World War II and other wars for that matter, from what I understand, most of them did not talk much about that war time experience except in response to prodding and questioning my relatives and friends.

I remember my dad was an air raid warden. We had many air raid drills in Arlington and across the country for that matter because there was the treat of air raids,

especially in localities along the eastern coast and the western coast, the coastal areas. Looking back on it, it was an interesting and somewhat exciting, and even a little frightening time but we survived it as most of the country did. And we not only survived it, I guess in a very real sense, we thrived on it. The other recollection that I have of the war that those that did not live through it might not understand or find peculiar is the rationing system -- rationing of certain foods, rationing of metals and building supplies, and especially the rationing of gasoline, and I learned first-hand the impact of the transformation of heavy industry to support the war effort in that that automobile repair shop of the gas station where I worked really did booming business because there were no new cars being built for a large section of the wartime period, because the automotive industry had been transformed to support the war effort and they were building tanks and jeeps and airplanes and other articles of war.

IH: The mood of the black community you were in, would you say it was very patriotic, for the most part, or did you have any folks that were kind of like . . .

RG: I would say the mood of the black community in which I lived, obviously in Virginia, south of the Mason-Dixon Line, was patriotic. It was part of the general national mood of patriotism. An important part of that mood was pride in African American members of the military forces even though they were serving in the segregated situation to the great credit of the African American Press, the Afro-American in the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender, and the like, and Ebony Magazine -- they were great sources of inspirational news as well as . . . well, the

inspirational news was the good part. The exposes of the inequities in terms of racial segregation was the disheartening part. But the reporting of Negro correspondence, I think had a great influence on the changes that occurred later on, so that I can remember family discussions in the newspapers about the Tuskegee Airmen and their success, and the Negro papers would seek out stories of accomplishments by Negro service men and women and they were sources of great pride because we were part of a great national effort to defeat the access powers and make the world better, safer, and that kind of thing.

IH: Now, as far as your interest in the military, did that stem from your sister's and your brother's military contribution? Is that what kind of motivated you?

RG: I kind of think that it did. My interest materialized in high school. I was part of the voluntary junior ROTC program at Cardozo High School in Washington, D.C., and I guess I was impressed, at least to some extent, by the uniform, by the distinction that the cadet corps was something special, above and beyond the basic academic and sports programs at the high school. That prepared me for university ROTC, senior ROTC participation at Howard University in those years when I was in college. At least the first two years at Howard University for males unless you were a veteran or had some medical exemption, participation in the ROTC program was mandatory and then the second two years, it was voluntary, so I stayed in the ROTC program at Howard University and was commissioned as a distinguished military graduate in 1952.

IH: O.K., now talk about how you chose Howard University. I mean, of course, there was segregation involved then but how did you choose that HBCU over a different one?

RG: Well, to be quite candid, I had learned from having helped dad prepare his income tax returns when I was in high school and studying accounting that our family finances were very limited and although dad had always said that he expected his children to go to college and that he would see that we went to college, it was clear to me that there was more hope there than there was substance in terms of financial ability. So, I had it in my mind when I was in high school that I would like to get an education in the field of business management and accounting, and that if I was to get that kind of education, I would have to get it on my own because dad just flat could not afford it. And so, I chose Cordoza High School which was identified as a business high school, as my high school of choice and I pursued what was essentially a business curriculum as opposed to a college preparatory curriculum, and I was really surprised in the second half of my senior year to be advised by one of the teachers and one of my mentors that I was probably going to be the salutatorian of my class and that since she had already determined that the valedictorian, for reasons that I did not fully understand, would not be going to college, that I would be the logical recipient of the faculty scholarship for that year, that it would be dependent upon acceptance into a 4 year college and her question was where had I applied? Well, I had not applied anywhere and she did not understand that. I explained to her why. She said, "Well, you need to get cracking and decide what you are going to do about that, otherwise, you are not going to get this

scholarship because acceptance into a 4 year college is a prerequisite." So, to make a long story short, in my naivety, I assumed that the local teachers college which was Minors Teachers College, would probably be the cheapest. When I inquired about that and compared it with the information, I had on Howard University. I found that Minor Teachers College would have been cheaper if I lived in Washington but since I did not live in Washington, I lived in Arlington, I would have to pay nonresident rates and that it really would be cheaper for me to go to Howard University. The cost would be not much different. So, I then applied at Howard University with the encouragement of that Professor Fitzhugh who was a neighbor and family friend in Arlington and although he never admitted it, I think he had some influence on my being accepted at Howard. So, I went to Howard, in a sense, by default. It was convenient, I knew that I would be a commuting student - I certainly did not have money to stay in a dormitory - and to make a long story short, I was accepted at Howard based primarily upon my general academics. However, I was accepted as a conditional student. The condition was that I quickly in the first, I guess it was the freshman year, made up for some of the academics - math and language, foreign language. I guess I had 2 years to get that all done. And fortunately, I was able to hold my own academically at Howard and to excel after I got over the frustration of being a freshman. I think you understand that going from being a high school senior with folks applauding you to being the low man on the totem pole as a freshman at a big university, was a bit of a culture shock. But that is how I got to Howard and once I got there, I was able to maintain academic excellence to the degree that I was able to get some additional scholarship and good old Professor Fitzhugh helped me get another job. With the help of the scholarships and working, and the small

stipulation from senior ROTC, which I think was about $30 a month, I was able to remain financial and graduate. It was a great experience. I knew I was getting a good education while I was there. I learned to appreciate it even much better after I graduated. The faculty from the president, Morencai Johnson, throughout the university was top notch. I have never regretted the choice that I made. In fact, I have come to be very proud of it and very grateful for the opportunity at Howard University.

John Hope Franklin was there. The lawyers who participated and led the Civil Rights litigation used to conduct moot court trial and try the arguments among themselves there at Howard Law School. I remember that experience very well. The classics department, the history department, the philosophy department, the art department, the English department, Sterling Brown was among the distinguished faculty. It was just a great academic experience. A great musical program. Dean Warner Lawson and the renowned Howard University Choir, the Howard Players who toured in Europe while we were there. It was a heady time.

IH: O.K. Do you think that . . . again, this is between 1940 and 1952 . . . did HBCU seem like sovereign islands or reprieves for African Americans who were trying to grow intellectually in comparison to the rest of the country that was . . . segregation was still running strong then. Were HBCUs seen then as like a lighthouse of hope or anything like that to African Americans?

RG: Well, I find it necessary as I think about that to think about it in the context of the time. For example, I never heard the term HBCU during the time I was in college. I

knew from perusing in the university library and from some of the visiting professors that came to Howard University that there were other distinguished Negro colleges.

IH: Is that what they called them back then? Negro colleges?

RG: Yes, and to tell you the truth, I was so focused on my studies and balancing my time with work and my studies and limited social life on campus and just the daily grind of commuting from Arlington to the university on the Hill 5 days a week, took up the majority of my time, so I cannot say that I had any great national or worldly outlook beyond my local university studies. And although there was a lot of activity that I would read about occasionally, well, frequently for that matter, in the local newspapers and the university student newspapers which I was active in managing, I guess I was, in effect, relying on the adults like Thurgood Marshall and James Nabrit who was the secretary of the university and also Professor Erasco, Charles Houston - folks like him who were working with the NAACP and the great legal battles - all of that resonated in my mind as efforts that were going to make it better and fairer for folks like myself when we got out of college. So, during 1948 to 1952, during my undergraduate years, there was nothing comparable at Howard, and I suspect in most of the Negro colleges and universities that was comparable to the great college student activism of the 1960s. I have friends who were 10 years younger than myself, who talk about the sit-ins in the South . . . [end of side 1]

. . . that one of my favorite professors who was a business law professor, commented in class one day about the situation in Washington, D.C. where blacks were not allowed to sit in white theaters nor eat at the lunch counters. There is a drug store on U Street which was a main corridor of black businesses but there was a drug store on the corner there on U Street - I think it was at 14th and U, but I do not remember for sure - but anyway, he commented one day about how many of us frequented that drug store and his comment really made the point that we had some economic leverage that he did not feel that we were using in that drug store and that we had a choice in terms of using that drug store or not patronizing that drug store, and that he suspected that if we did not patronize it, they might change their policy or else, they would go out of business. Some of us were a little skeptical about his logic and some of us students said either directly to him or among ourselves that yes, it was easy for him to say that because he did not have to live with the insulting situation but, you know, his logic resonated and somebody made a comment to him, "What do you mean they would go out of business?" The upshot of the conversation was that he knew what he was talking about because he owned the building and the folks that had the drugstore were leasing it from him. I had the feeling that his heart was right with respect to the disparity in the social and economic situation in Washington and he was, in a diplomatic but challenging way, encouraging us to think about what we could do to be part of a constructive change in the status quo. And, of course, what he was suggesting is what, in later years, turned out to be a great national movement in terms of the challenge to the status quo. And this was a white law professor teaching at Howard University in response to questions by his students as to why he taught at Howard University. He was very candid - and that he

taught at Howard University because he liked to teach, he specifically liked teaching at Howard University, but he made it very clear that he paid his secretary more than Howard University paid him to come up there and teach. And he did not say it in any divisive, bragging, overly bragging manner. The quality of his teaching endeared him to his students including me and I made a point to stay in touch with him even after I graduated for a period of time, and I am grateful for the business law instruction that I learned at his tutelage.

IH: O.K., now during your undergrad time in the ROTC program, and again, of course, in 1948, we had desegregation of the military but did your ROTC cadre of instructions, give you any type of special advice or counsel on joining a predominantly white military or anything like that?

RG: The short answer to your question is yes. All of our military faculty, with the exception of the professor of military science, the senior cadre professor, was African American. The senior cadre member was white. I strongly suspect that this was his terminal assignment. I do not remember his teaching any crisis so he was not a force in the classroom. The African American cadre members, both officer and enlisted, and by enlisted, they were all mid level to senior NCOs, were proud soldiers. I feel that I got a good ROTC instruction. It would not be possible for me with any authority to compare the instruction that we got with instruction that white students got it at the white universities and the ROTC program except to say that, from my perspective, those of us at Howard seemed to be equally prepared at summer camp. Those of us who were

commissioned and went to our basic officer courses following graduation survived that integrated experience, and some of us became more than averagely successful. As far as special instruction, I would say that in the classroom and in the elderly classroom of counseling and mentoring, the advice was good, it was simple, it was emphasizing the importance of our education, the ROTC education and training as well as education in the college of liberal arts or school of architecture and engineering - whatever school we were in. They emphasized that the military tended to be a very unforgiving institution, that morals were important, we could not afford to be lax in the performance of our duty, it was important for us to know what was expected of us and to do it and to do it the best we could. We were reminded that at least in the early years of our military service; we would not have much influence on the assignments that we got. There was kind of a pattern that was established for most young officers. The important thing was to know your job and to do it as best you could, and if you did that, although the system might not be completely fair from a racial standpoint, the idea of overwhelming your competitors and your distracters with your excellence would be the best way to succeed. And we were also imbued with the idea, which was certainly a truism, that one of the important experiences of military officership would be that we would get a much larger and broader leadership opportunity in the military than we would probably get in the civilian sector. We were reminded that we would be responsible for the lives of our soldiers and our NCOs, and if we were smart, we would learn from our experienced NCOs, we were imbued with the idea that we needed to respect them, notwithstanding the fact that we outrank them, we certainly at the outset would not be more knowledgeable than they

were, and all of that was just very sage advice and it certainly stood me in good stead over the years, and I am very grateful for it.

IH: O.K., now, looking back over your career with, let's say, other African American officers who graduated from HBCUs, do you feel that since you graduated from an HBCU and not a traditional white school or OCS program, that graduating from an HBCU gave you something special or something significant that could not have happened at another school, outside of being a proficient officer, I mean?

RG: Well, I guess my perspective on that question is that I really did not have any base of comparison while I was a cadet student at the HBCU. Once I graduated and found myself working with other young officers, I did not feel inferior in any way to my contemporaries. My first military assignment after graduating in 1952 was at Fort Benning, Georgia in the heart of the South. My basic infantry officer class was, I suspect, about 95% or more West Point graduates, class of 1952. The class president happened to be an African American veteran, Korean War veteran. That was interesting. But the discipline and morale of the company was high. It was obvious that there was a special camaraderie among the majority of the members of that class, that company, that resulted from their being classmates at West Point. My social interaction with those West Point graduates was limited but the limited social contact was a quality social contact. To some extent, it centered around attending chapel together and eating together in the mess hall. Most of us were bachelors so we lived in the officer barracks, and most of us walked to the dining facility, the mess hall, and the chapel on Sundays. Many of

the West Point graduates did have automobiles, however, I did not. But I was able to bum a ride with members of the group. My recollection is that in that company, there were less than a handful of Negro officers. But we all graduated together and went on to serve. I met a few of them over the years, one of whom I lost track of and never met him again until we were classmates at the Army War College almost 20 years later. But we remembered our time together at Fort Benning.

IH: O.K. I want to fast forward a little bit to the Civil Rights era in the 1960s. Can you talk about what it was like during that time as an African American officer when you had, again, Dr. Martin Luther King and the SCLC and _ (inaudible) _____ and all those Civil Rights organizations, were trying to improve the conditions of African Americans, from your perspective, what you were taking in during that time?

RG: During the period of 1955 to 1958, I was in Europe, I did not encounter any problems in that 3 year period, that 3 year assignment in Europe. I was very comfortably situated professionally in a unique organization. The quartermaster supplied an accounting office in Giessen, Germany. When I came back to the States in 1958, I went to quartermaster advanced course at Fort Lee, Virginia. Outside of the post, Virginia was segregated in schools and recreational facilities I did not feel that impact all that much because most of my activities were centered on the post. I enjoyed going over to Virginia State College for chapel and I did that frequently, I will put it that way. In 1959, the Army sent me to graduate school at George Washington University for which I will always be grateful, then I went back to Fort Lee in 1960 after I completed graduate

school and I taught there at the quartermaster school for 3 years and as it turned out, our oldest son at that point in 1962 had completed kindergarten at an integrated school on the post. And, for the first time, I had to come to grips with the fact that he would be entering segregated schools and the local economy. A retired lieutenant colonel hosted a meeting of black officers to discuss what we might do in response to a daily bulletin publication of the post headquarters at Fort Lee that provided instruction for the registration of schoolchildren, dependent schoolchildren, in the academic year of 1962, 1962 to 1963. I was invited to attend this meeting in the evening at this retired lieutenant colonel's house in Ettrick, Virginia, near Virginia State College and we discussed at that meeting the implications of that directive that instructed parents of white students to go to a certain place to register their children and for parents of Negro children, dependent children, to go to another place and we were not pleased with that.

We were particularly concerned that that directive, in effect, was supporting the local pattern of segregated schools and was certainly in no way challenging the Virginia State position of massive resistance in terms of not implementing the Supreme Court ruling regarding not only the inequity but also the illegality of segregated schools. And so, when we got to the point of trying to decide what we might constructively do about that, there was a consensus that it might be helpful for a small group to request an audience with a commanding general at Fort Lee and to explain to him that we felt that we were being deprived of our civil rights, and that what we had been instructed to do in that daily bulletin in that publication was really contrary to national policy and the edict of the Supreme Court. The question then arose to who was going to do that? I volunteered to be a part of it. I said I would do it. The older members of the group said,

"Well, no, we are not going to send you in there to do that. You have got a promising career. That is not fair. We are not going to do that." And so, I said, "Well, I will talk to my boss and tell him that that is what I would like to do and see if he will assist me in getting an office call with the commanding general." Well then, two or three others volunteered to be part of the group to go speak to the general to try to get this audience with the general. The retired lieutenant colonel said, "I will certainly go. He cannot do anything to me. I am retired." He said, "But I would like to think I have a little bit of influence over there." There was another officer by the name of Major Price who also had young daughters who would be going to school. Of course, the older one had already been enrolled in the local segregated school system previously. But anyway, as I recall, there were 3 of us that went. There might have been 4. In any event, all the others are now deceased.

I told my local immediate boss what I would like to do and why I would like to do it. He was a white major with whom I had a good professional relationship and he arranged with his boss who was a department chair; they got me an appointment with the commandant who was a full colonel. So, I went in and explained to him what my position was. He was sympathetic and said that he would take the initiative and attempt to get an audience with the commanding general, and then he asked an interesting question. He asked if the secretary of the quartermaster school, who happened to be an African American lieutenant colonel, would be going with me because I told him, "No sir, I had not anticipated that because he had not been at the meeting and I really had not discussed this with him." This took him by surprise and he said, "Well, I think he ought to go." And so, he picked up the phone and called this lieutenant colonel in and told him

that he was arranging to . . . well, he explained to him why I was in the office there -- I was a young captain at the time -- and he said, "I think you need to be with him when he goes over there." And, of course, there was nothing for that lieutenant colonel to say but yes. I kind of had the feeling that I would get the Riot Act from that lieutenant colonel for not going through him. It never occurred for me to do that, to tell you the truth. Well, we got the appointment with the commanding general and when we arrived, it turned out to be a meeting with not just the commanding general who was a two star major general at the time but he had two or three of his senior staff people there in addition to the small contingent. I turned out to be the spokesperson, explained why we were there. There was some comment by the other members of the group. After we made our brief opening comment, the commanding general said something to the effect that he understood what we were saying and requesting, he assured us that his background was that of someone raised in New England, as I recalled, and he did not have a prejudice bone in his body, however, what we were asking him to do he felt was beyond his authority to do. He lectured us to the effect that the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, knew the situation in the segregated school system there in Virginia and he had not received any direction to do anything in an effort to change that and that as a matter of fact, this was really, he thought, a matter for the Department of Education and Welfare and not the Department of Defense to pursue in terms of national policy. And he felt that it was really out of his hands.

I remember that one of the staff members and I do not remember exactly who it was, who then made some comments in support of the General that surely we must understand that the general had no authority to tell the local school authorities how to

run their schools, that that was really a civilian matter. That was the disappointing turn of events although the wise retired lieutenant colonel had told us in advance to expect that kind of a response but notwithstanding that, I felt so outraged at that response that I responded that all of us sitting there fully understood what the general had said and what the staff colonel head said; that we were not suggesting that the general could dictate how the schools would be operated, however, everyone in the room understood very clearly that Fort Lee, by virtue of its economic impact on the local community, carried an influential posture there and that what we were hoping and requesting was that the commanding general will utilize what we consider to be his considerable moral and economic influence to persuade local authorities to honor the Supreme Court directive and the law of the land so that the large component of the military community, the African American community at Fort Lee, would not have its civil rights abused and negated. My recollection is that the commanding general looked to his staff for some comment or some suggestions of how to respond to my comment but none was forthcoming, and the meeting was concluded by the general saying, "Thank you," and we left.

That confrontation was a big wakeup call for me. I was not quite sure what the impact would be. Subsequently, I got a call from the Justice Department Civil Rights Division telling me that they were aware of the situation at Fort Lee, that they were in process of preparing litigation with the state in Richmond, giving me advanced notice that I would be invited to participate in that hearing, that court hearing, and I was asked if I thought there would be any difficulty in affirmatively responding to that invitation but it was made very clear that if I thought there would be any difficulty, they would

simply send me a subpoena and then I would be forced to come and that no one at Fort Lee would have the authority to stop me from coming. I told them I did not know that there would be any effort to stop me but I certainly would be willing to come and I did not expect that there would be any effort to stop me from coming. And in the course of the discussion that we had had at the General's office, we had told him that we anticipated that we might be invited to participate in the federal suit against the state and that if we were invited, of course, we intended to go. So, going was never an issue.

I, along with Major Price, did go. My recollection is that we were not called to testify but that was certainly an interesting experience in that federal court building in Richmond.

IH: Yes, I am sure.

RG: To make a long story shorter, that academic year, 1962 to 1963, did not change the local school system. During that time, I was selected for promotion and also selected to go to Command General Staff College at Leavenworth, Kansas. The justice department representative made it very clear to me that if I had any indication that I might be a victim of any reprisals by the authorities at Fort Lee, to let them know and that they would handle it at the Justice Department level but nothing like that has ever occurred. My son went to segregated first grade there in Petersburg and during the course of the next year, the Secretary of Defense who was McNamara, issued a directive to all military installation commanders to do exactly what we had asked the commanding general to do, and that was to use their considerable influence to persuade local civilian

authorities not to infringe upon or deny military personnel and their dependents what they were entitled to under national policy in federal courts. And, in fact, McNamara's direction went further than the school issue, the education issue, and instructed the installation commanders in the area of housing and recreational facilities for example to, in effect, put off post facilities off limits to military personnel where there treatment was prejudicial. So, that sort of upped the ante in terms of off-post housing and off-post recreation. And so, McNamara's directive was probably a lot more . . . well, it certainly complemented what the Justice Department was doing. From a personal standpoint, of course, my family and I were gone by then but that was welcome news when it did occur.

IH: O.K. Well, we are coming down to basically the last question or so with the first part of the interview. Can you talk about your feelings concerning the Black Power Movement during the late 1960s?

RG: My perspective on the Black Power Movement was that it was almost inevitable. There were obviously two streams of action going on simultaneously. There was Martin Luther King's movement that involved peaceful protests, nonviolent protests. That was complemented by the Civil Rights litigation by Charlie Marshall and others. Concurrent with that was the more strident Black Power Movement that made no pretenses of being nonviolent. In fact, their modus operandii was that they would respond in kind to the extent that violence was used towards them. There was certainly visible tension between those two lines of thought and lines of action. My perspective is that the Civil Rights Movement [end of tape #1, side 2]

My thought is that the Civil Rights Movement benefited from the actions of both streams of action. It was certainly unfortunate that the brutality of the racist elements in the country resulted in the bombings and the killings, similar violence occurred. The heroics of Martin Luther King and his faction in practicing nonviolence in keeping with Mahatma Gandhi's example, made a great moral statement not only for the rest of our country but for the world. Personally, I am grateful for the actions taken by both streams of response to racist segregational policies of those who were attempting for the advancement of civil liberties. Now, I say that in retrospect but it is really the way I was feeling at the time I was doing my duty as a military officer. During the year of 1968 to 1969, I was a battalion commander at Fort Carson, Colorado, and one of the requirements for us there at Fort Carson, Colorado was to be prepared to respond to presidential directive to utilize military force to maintain civil order in the event of significant racial conflict. So, I was personally involved in training troops in how to conduct themselves if we were called upon to be deployed to do that kind of work.

I prayed a lot about the prospect of having to take my troops into a civilian community and have them face-to-face with fellow American citizens in a confrontational mode. We did a lot of training and practice alerts. I had a small advanced party deployed to Chicago for a political convention and I had troops on the tarmac at the airport there in Colorado Springs. I was prepared to go and at the last minute, we were told to stand down. And so, fortunately, I did not have to take troops to Chicago to participate in that kind of confrontation but that was a scary period of time. I am grateful that we did not have to go because it was challenging enough to be training

my troops to go to Vietnam but on top of that, to have to train them to participate in quelling domestic disturbances was a real professional challenge.

IH: I am sure. I had read where some black troops, it was in the black press or something, I read where they said they did not want to be deployed in the face of other African American civilians. And this was before Kent State. I mean, I am sure after the Kent State incident . . . this is (inaudible) _____ but did the military redesign its plans on dealing with civilian conflict after that, the Kent State incident? You were probably in Vietnam then though.

RG: Well, if we looked at military history and national history, I think it is fair to say that it has always been part of the military's responsibility to be prepared to do what is necessary to maintain civil law and order when it becomes apparent that local civil authorities are inadequate to do it. Civil authorities have primary first responsibilities. Local governors have secondary responsibility utilizing National Guard facilities and when that appears to be inadequate or ineffective or noneffective, then history shows that the president including President Eisenhower utilized national authority to employ military to meet the local domestic requirements of and the president has statutory authority to federalize National Guard troops in the event that the local governor refuses to do so, and we have had examples of that being done.

IH: Yes, Central High in Arkansas comes to mind.

RG: Yes, absolutely.

IH: O.K. For this part of the interview that we have done a second time, I have basically come to the end of the questions. Did you have anything you wanted to add about dealing with Civil Rights and the Black Power Movement in the 1960s?

RG: Well, you know, hindsight is fantastic and when you have had the opportunity to live in places other than the United States, you get a chance to broaden your perspective. And so, my perspective is that this democratic small (inaudible) _____ experiment that our country has been embarked upon for over 200 years now has proven to be a rather dicey experience. We have not lived up to the redderick of the Declaration of Independence. We have dealt to the high-sounding rhetoric of the Constitution and its amendments. We are still involved in an experiment in progress. We certainly, from the standpoint of civil rights, I think, are a lot better than we were before the Civil Rights era in the 1960s but we have not yet achieved our ideal democracy. For my part, I feel grateful to have been a part of that ongoing process. I look to younger folks like yourself in the military and in the field of education and diplomacy and legal prudence to make the next 50 to 100 years even better and so at this point in my life, I am very proud -- I continue to be proud to be an American -- and to have played some modest role in helping to refine the quality of life for others here in this country and abroad for that matter. I do have some serious reservations about our ability, our capability, perhaps even our competence, to shape the societies of other countries because other countries have cultures and traditions that are very unlike ours.

IH: That is so true.

RG: And I think one of our great challenges in the period going forward is to be careful of our inclination to impose our wisdom on others. It is difficult, maybe even impossible, to do, certainly in the short run. And I think that our experience in the Middle East especially is reminding us of that. I think there are a lot of ways in which we have been effective and can continue to be effective in helping other countries and other cultures to share our vision of human rights and democracy. I think we made some success in Korea and I think we made some success in eastern Europe but there are societies and cultures especially in the Middle East, in Asia, that are proving to be a lot more challenging than I think our best minds have anticipated, and we have a lot to learn in terms of our ability and our limitations in that regard.

IH: O.K. Very well said, General. I am going to stop the tape recorder now.