

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

Interview with: Colonel Sanderson Woods

Interviewed by: Isaac Hampton II

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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

Topic: Black Officers, Vietnam, HBCUs

IH: Today's date is February 16, 2006. I am on the campus of Prairie View University in Prairie View, Texas, Waller County, and I am interviewing Mr. Sanderson Woods. Mr. Woods, what is your date of birth?

SW: March 15, 1941.

IH: And where are you from originally?

SW: Prairie View, Texas. In fact, I grew up there. I was born in Lovelady, Texas, and moved there when I was 4 years old. I grew up on campus.

IH: On campus? O.K. So, this is really like being home for you then. Can we start with your educational background? Can you talk about your experience in the PV ROTC program?

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SW: I started school in 1958. Of course, at that time, ROTC was mandatory. Two years mandatory. So consequently, because of the draft, I elected to go to the advanced corps, if you will, and decided to stay 4 years, about 4 years.

IH: As far as segregation and things like that, what was your experience with that as a student, you know, being from this area and everything?

SW: It was all black. Of course, my freshman and sophomore year, I was involved in the ROTC band. (Inaudible) _____ the drill team and subsequent to that, (inaudible) _____. The only time that I guess color got involved was not until we went to advanced course and that particular year, we were all at Fort Hood, Texas, and so you were competing against the Aggies, Texas A&M, as an example, which, at that time, was, in fact, an all white male university.

IH: And what was that like? Did they treat you as (inaudible) _____?

SW: I mean, really, no. We were competing against each other. I mean, summer camp is what turned me around as well as my 13 other classmates in terms of looking at the possibility of a career. But you are competing against those guys. We were there together, I mean, that is what it was. When I look back on it, I do not recall anything. There probably was but we did not have time to think about that. You were trying to do

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what was best for yourself as well as for the university, to make us look as good as we could and that is what we were trained to do.

IH: And what type of events did they have, like map reading and marksmanship - what kind of competition was it?

SW: Well, you had all that. I mean, the primary thing that you had that might impact on what you were saying though was peer ratings, because a big part of your score _____ was peer ratings and that is based on . . . you were put in leadership positions every day and subordinate positions, and if there was anything in terms of race involved, it was that, because a lot of blacks (inaudible) _____ not necessarily at Prairie View (inaudible) _____ and this is in retrospect, primarily when I ended up in ROTC myself some years later as a (inaudible) _____ in a predominantly white school but, you know, that is when you can really get it stuck to you and it caused, at some point in time, some cadets to either get recycled meaning they would have to go back the next year before being commissioned.

IH: Who was your commandant then at PV? Who ran the ROTC program that you remember?

SW: General Becton, he was not a general then but he was Captain Becton, was on the Academy in my first couple of years in ROTC and he subsequently later on became president here. He actually graduated from Prairie View.

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IH: How did the structures here prepare you for joining a predominantly white military?

SW: There, again, I do not recall any specific preparation geared towards going into a white environment. The only thing it did was prepare us in terms of what branches and how they selected branches, because that particular year did not make any difference anyway because everybody was branch combat army, for the most part. It was always you (inaudible) ____ your major and then you planned for chemical corps and medical service corps. And my third choice was armory which is what I ended up being commissioned in and what I spent 30 years at. But I do not recall any specific things back then. It was just the same thing you used to hear is you have got to do the best you can, starting (inaudible)_____, and you know, that was the mentality I think at that time about going to summer camp.

IH: As far as going into armor, were there many black officers in that particular branch?

SW: I mean, you have a predominantly white officer corps and I would say a predominantly black NCO corps but, you know, it (inaudible) _____especially during the (inaudible)_____ battalion command and the first 5 or 6 years, I was the only black officer in the organization, and I served most of my time outside the United States. So, my first tour was in Korea.

IH: What years were you in Korea?

SW: The first time was 1962 to 1964. Then, I went back again in 1980.

IH: In regards to attending or graduating HBU, looking back, do you feel that graduating from an HBCU gave you something that a traditionally white ROTC program or OCS could not have given you?

SW: It gave you the will to excel based on the time that I was in school and having worked in a predominantly white school later on as the only black officer there, _I was primarily there because I was black. That is what they said it was not but it was in Mississippi at the same time. I did not know that until later on. I was also (inaudible) _____ coming back to Prairie View and also Texas A&M. But that is just the way at that point in time. But now, I do not think it was any different than preparation for any career because at that point in time, my classmates who were engineers who did not go into the military, the promised land was California. Everybody went to California to work. It has come full circle now. Because you could not get any jobs as a black engineer here in Houston.

IH: When you were commissioned as an officer, did you feel any type of added pressure or anything like that as far as representing your race?

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SW: Yes, I think so.

IH: So, during your time at PV getting ready to get commissioned, was there conversations with like maybe Becton or Red saying that, hey, as an African American, you are going into the service; you are representing more than just yourself - you are representing the race, maybe perhaps you are blazing the trail for the next group of officers - that type of thing? Was there any of that type of talk or conversations?

SW: I do not remember specifically. Actually, the NCOs are the ones that really provided you more information and that is through your own positions within ROTC. Like, I was a company commander in ROTC as well as my senior year; I was with the commander for the (inaudible) _____. And through that, I ended up in a (inaudible) _____ if you will with other white cadets because the (inaudible) _____ was a nationwide ROTC organization at that time so I had to go up to Oklahoma State which was our headquarter with other cadets who were all white, for the most part. You know, they always were on you about certain things that you needed to do but it was necessarily because you were black or looking forward to it, it was more like making sure you (inaudible) _____ to go in. I mean, most of us still were not geared to going in for a career. You were going in (inaudible) _____ your motivation which impacted on graduation really, too, because all of us that started as freshmen graduated as seniors because if you fell below a 2.0, you got drafted .So, that was kind of a motivator

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compared to what we see now. Bring the ROTC back or the draft but in retrospect, it did get a lot of schools they may not have. And you see one or two people that disappear and join the Air Force because those one or two probably did not make the cut _____ not really flunk out. If you could maintain a C average, you were gone.

IH: I guess that was some pretty powerful motivation then.

SW: We did not look at it like that in school but, I mean, it was.

IH: Now, in the mid 1960s, what were your feelings about the Civil Rights Movement, what was happening?

SW: One thing I might add which may not seem as important: I was a bachelor. I did not get married. So, there is a distinct difference in my experience, some of my peers that got married as soon as they graduated, with some of us staying friends that way because I was engaged when I left Prairie View but that was another story. We broke up. Nobody knew it. And after that, I was just like all you focus on is just the commission. You take assignments that you probably would not take or probably would not have thought about if I was married. So, as I said, when I left the basic course in Fort Knox, Kentucky, my first tour was in Korea and (inaudible) _____ extended me through another Christmas. I spent two Christmases there but he gave me a command as a second lieutenant which was unusual. And that was part of the turning point. And he did not release me until I put in for my regular Army papers. And that was the first guy that influenced me. The rest is history starting with that. But I was fortunate to have my

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first command, company command of a tank company as a second lieutenant. I got promoted to first lieutenant.

IH: So, he saw something in you obviously.

SW: Well, he stayed in my . . . well, you literally were taught (inaudible) _____ but then there was two sides (inaudible) _____ 24/7 living together but then when you have a break and went to the Officers Club or something like that, he would be a different person, and he had techniques that he did to make sure you were straight. So, that did not mean much until 10, 15 years later.

SW: The point is, in 1964, I came back to the States. The only time I was in Texas at Fort Hood and that was 8 months, 9 months, of which 2 of those months, I was out in the desert training. So, that was when some of the things were just getting started. Then, I went to Germany for a short tour and then, what happened in Germany during that time frame was when Watts was burning and when they were having the early riots, that was reflected in the military, too, that you do not hear much about but we were having problems. I was on the _(inaudible) _____ and that is when the war was still (inaudible) _____ all West Pointers with the exception of me, officers, but it had gotten to the point where blacks would not allow whites to cross (inaudible) _____ at certain times of the night and I got down into a position of trying to work this out because what was going on is guys from California, whatever was happening in Watts, and that is something that you do not hear much about. You know, you were going to

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D.C. and all the rest of the riots, just like it was for the soldiers that went back into. . . they had to go back in (inaudible) _____ went into Detroit and other places, that is hard for a Vietnam veteran to go (inaudible) _____ your neighborhood as a member of the military force into some of that. Martin Luther King was just starting some of the things there. "How come trouble always starts anytime he goes anywhere?" Those were the types of things that I used to see. "What is he trying to do?" That is when you get these comments about (inaudible) _____.

IH: "He," referring to Martin Luther King?

SW: Yes, because you are looking at the news - the news, you have the stars and stripes. There is no TV now, no 24/7 CNN. So, everything is through (inaudible) _____. So what you have is not compared to now where it is real-time. It is all new. Black Panthers. I was out in California for a couple of years. I was there when Oakland was burning. So, I am saying a lot of our _(inaudible) _____ it was kind of distant but what you do not hear much about (inaudible) _____ especially outside the United States, the relations between blacks and whites enlisted. We had a couple of examples of the KKK, for some of the people that were commissioned, NCOs that were (inaudible) _____ KKK, some cross burnings.

IH: In Germany?

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SW: Yes. On the (inaudible) _____ in the military. The military had (inaudible) _____ among themselves.

IH: And as a black officer, how did you handle that?

SW: You did what your boss told you to do and like I said, it was several years later that I became concerned about it and realized that I was expendable, meaning why didn't he go out there, the squadron lieutenant colonel? Why send me out there as a first lieutenant and captain? But you did what you were . . . because I did not know everybody. They knew me because you kind of stand out as a black officer but that does not mean . . . I knew the blacks in my unit but I did not know the blacks in the whole (inaudible) _____ when you have got other units from somewhere else reporting. So, I mean, that was some of the (inaudible) _____ it continued to do the same thing. In Vietnam, too.

IH: Did you feel that the black enlisted, did they feel more comfortable coming to you about things . . .

SW: They know you but you have got to (inaudible) _____ report over them just like everybody else. Then, they know you and then you go into another (inaudible) _____ thing and all that. I never was called that - I am just saying it is a day-to-day thing. Just because you are black does not mean that . . . you have got to earn their respect, too, I guess is what I am saying.

IH: Just because you are black does not mean you are automatically in?

SW: That is what I am saying. Other than (inaudible) _____ but it is something that you do not care that much about.

IH: O.K., so, again, during the Civil Rights Movement, even though you were committed to the military, prepared to die for the country if need be, did you have any thoughts/reservations about being on the front lines, I am fighting for the country; however, back home, we still have not secured enough civil rights? I mean, was there a controversy there morally for you or any other professionals, , in the back of your mind, like, man, I am doing this for the country but, again, I still do not have the same rights as a white person back home? They say I do but it is not enforced.

SW: No, I did not think about that. I mean, I really did not as much as still trying to do the best job you can, and believe it or not, you are for your race. And that is hard to really articulate. That is true (inaudible) _____ and I think it still goes on today. But when I came home here to Houston, in the South, I saw more . . . because you get more respect in the South by being a black in the military than you would be up north.

IH: Why is that?

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SW: Because the North, I do not think, respects the military overall. I mean, look at the makeup and demographics. It is not just going in . . . everybody goes in from the South. And we could go into a whole another story (inaudible) _____ but when I came home to Houston, I never got spat on or anything like that. In fact, when I went to (inaudible) _____, they upgraded you, they did all sorts of things that I never experienced anywhere else. I mean, they really were. If you were in uniform or even if they knew you were a uniform, there was some different feeling that I had experienced, personally experienced in the things other people experienced in other places. I mean, that was 10 years down the line, like it was with everybody else at that time. You had back to back tours, the same thing that is going on with Iraq now. I never personally experienced that. They would move you to the head of the line, it would get you on the airplane, it would get you out of here, they took care of you, the stewardesses took care of you. That is one example.

IH: O.K., so there were some privileges that went with the uniform?

SW: Well, I am saying, I think so. I mean, as long as we were not . . . and I saw that all the way through to when I was stationed in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in ROTC in 1972 Same thing there.

IH: Now, when you were in Oakland, again, and Vietnam is going on in the later 1960s, what were your feelings about the Black Power Movement?

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SW: Well, actually, while I was in the Oakland area as I was MediVac'd out of Vietnam, I ended up in Letterman General Hospital which was in San Francisco then, I was there in and out for 2 years. So, that is when all this stuff in Oakland was going on and the Black Panthers . . . I was there as a patient actually, but I lived there but I got the chance to understand really what was going on. It was the same thing - you would go to Oakland, one side is burning and you got burned and on the other side, nothing was going on except going to school. And I kind of understand the mentality for some of the friends, civilian friends, if you will, I was able to (inaudible) _____ about it then but even then, you had another side because I loved jazz. So, you were over with guys who were doing that in San Francisco and Oakland was another world across the bridge.

IH: Well, I guess ever in your command, did you encounter any Black Power soldiers or soldiers who succumbed to the Black Power philosophy - that were doing the dap and the Black Power sign?

SW: Oh, yes, they went through all of that. And officers, too, because I fortunately or unfortunately, we went through this whole bit of trying to teach race relations, and drugs and alcohol. It was a mandatory class in which I ended up on an assignment for being one of the instructors for a mandatory installation class at Fort Knox, Kentucky. And, on any given day, I would start out with second lieutenants, captains in advanced course to general officers and a white counterpart (inaudible) _____ as they called it then.

IH: What was it called again?

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SW: (Inaudible) _____ one black, one white, and there was this mandatory class that was dictated by the Department of the Defense?

IH: What year was that?

SW: Oh, the year of the classes when I was there was 1970. That was another solution, you know, (inaudible) _____ race relations institute was guarded, (inaudible) _____ and that was something. That was hard because you just got . . . I mean, you were a victim. You were just getting jumped on with questions because 99% of the people that you had were all white. Then, they would come up to and ask you could you give me the definition of what this means so I could understand the black soldier?" I said, "The first thing you need to do is do not worry about that. Talk to them just like you talk to everybody else because if I tell you what this means, by the time you try to use it, it will mean something else, because if someone tells you a term you use in the North, I used to say will get you kissed, and get you cut in the South. And all you are doing is being condescending, first of all and second, you are degrading your own rank. Just talk to them like you talk to everybody else. There is no solution." There was that concern, and if you are real, then you will be O.K. but if you are not, they are going to see through you like everybody else does. And I saw that even in my own career on the bosses that did not know where they were coming from, that tried to be politically correct which is the term that you use now. You saw right through them.

And I hate to say it again about the South and the North but that was my experience, and

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most of my senior officers I worked for, the ones that were from the South. The one or two from the North, they were always one way or the other, they were honest with you. You might not like the way they talked to you but they were honest in giving feedback on your performance as opposed to waiting until the time for a report and then killing or not helping you.

IH: Early in your career, all of your senior officers were white?

SW: Yes. I did not have a black boss, I mean, senior boss. I did not work for one. The senior raters, if you will, were all white.

IH: You said the ones from the North?

SW: They were not honest. I mean, I am saying they were honest meaning by the time that happened, the ones before that, I am talking about this whole thing about race and when it started (inaudible) _____ and the black officers, you know, like the first group of general officers and like one guy mentioned to me at one time in passing and I did not think about it until 4 hours later . . . he said, "What are the qualifications that you have to get promoted to colonel besides being black?" Well, he had gotten passed over so I knew what he meant but, you know, I just kind of ignored him and talked about it later. That actually put pressure on me because that means you had to overcome that. It depends on where you were. I am just talking about my personal experience. So, you had to prove yourself even though you had been promoted and you thought (inaudible)

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_____ but then you have got to prove to somebody -- it might be your subordinate officer (inaudible) _____ but that is why you had to have more qualifications than just being black.

IH: So, throughout your military career, you felt that type of pressure?

SW: I tried not to let it bother me.

SW: Yes. What I am saying is that I did not let it bother me then. You just had to go out and perform. So, it never ends. It never ends. My very first company commander in Korea was the worst. Jeremiah (inaudible) _____, he just was not . . . he did not know how to act. Later on, I passed him up on promotion actually. I am not bragging, I am just saying it happened. I asked him for some honest (inaudible) _____ and he did not give it to me, so I talked to my platoon sergeant and he gave it to me. And so, I dealt with (inaudible) _____, I spent a lot of time with NCOs. And you might get criticized for that but when you are in Korea, it did not make any difference because there is nobody over there but Koreans. There are no families there at that point in time. So, when you get to like in Germany, it makes a difference when you are assigned some place where there is family and bachelors are in the minority. (inaudible) _____ you have to be careful what you do and all this kind of stuff. And so, I ended up (inaudible) _____ because if you went down to the NCO club, you could not go in there unless you got invited. And we lived in the Officers Club. I mean, that is where the bachelor's quarters were. We looked good, I am saying that, but, I mean, there were

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always girls down at the NCO club. There was nobody coming in there but old married women in the Officers Club. I mean, what I am talking about is the social life which we have not addressed. That is another issue, too.

When I was in Germany, a lot of the NCOs were stabilized because they had married Germans and they could not go back to the States a lot of time because it was against the law to be married to white women. I am talking about the 1960s. And even if you went back, it was hard to get any place to live off the post or the base because they would not rent to you. And that was legal. That is part of the (inaudible) _____. It was not until the 1960s that Georgia and some of those places in the South, it was illegal to be married. So, consequently, a lot of NCOs in my unit were stabilized because they were stabilizing (inaudible) _____ did 4 or 5 years in the same unit.

IH: So, you spent a lot of time with NCOs when you were in Korea or Germany . . .

SW: Well, both of them, I was still a bachelor. Do you know what I am saying? When I say that, I mean primarily socially (inaudible) _____.

IH: How did that help you for your command?

SW: I mean, you cannot do it by yourself and I think NCOs can teach you a lot _____ and that is something you cannot teach. We cannot come out there and say, "I am a second lieutenant. I am a West Pointer. I am an ROTC graduate. I know more than you." That gets people hurt. I mean, you have got to work as a team. I saw that more so . . . I mean, every organization I was in all throughout my career, I would say that exists.

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I saw it even closer as an advisor because I had two tours as an advisor, military advisor command in Vietnam like a Special Forces team because you are the only officers . . . you become very close, I will put it like that. (inaudible) _____ you know how to deal with it.

IH: O.K.

SW: Does this make sense what I am saying?

IH: Yes, it is excellent. Let me ask you this: I want to read a couple of names to you and we will talk about some things dealing with them, with masculinity. Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown, Fred Williamson, or Tommy Smith, the Olympic athlete - if you can remember from the 1960s, which one of those figures represented masculinity to you?

SW: Well, I did not ever really know them in that aspect. Muhammad Ali who refused to go in the military here in Houston, Texas - initially, I thought that was wrong. Then, later on for standing up for his rights, you know, and he took some changes there. Jim Brown and Fred Williamson, I never did equate them to other than Jim Brown, one of the greatest athletes, and Fred Williamson that was in movies and did O.K. but Jim Brown has had an interesting career after sports. He is still doing a gang-related . . . I mean, not gang-related but working with young men (inaudible) _____, he went through other things himself so I guess I respect him not as a man but as a black man

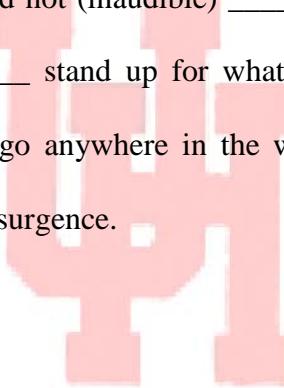
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trying to help black kids, if you will. Fred Williamson is just a guy that played in the movies. I do not equate that to anything.

IH: He played for Kansas City.

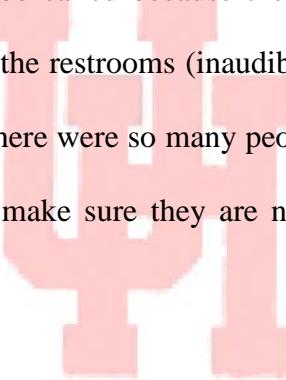
SW: Well, yes, but I did not equate it that much with him. Tommy Smith, now the same as Muhammad Ali but in a different respect in terms of what he did and in terms of the Olympics of 1968, that stood up for Black Power then. I guess each individually in different ways. I personally did not (inaudible) _____ Muhammad Ali and Tommy Smith (inaudible) _____ stand up for what is right. You see that now in retrospect. Muhammad Ali can go anywhere in the world and he is respected. And Tommy Smith, I mean, is like a resurgence.



SW: I actually wanted, as I explained before . . . a black officer in the Army would be the Buffalo Soldiers, which you still hear about now (inaudible) _____ because Buffalo soldiers were (inaudible) _____ and if you think about it, it is two minorities beating up on each other because they were all black enlisted commanded by white officers. I do not know if you have been to the museum in Houston yet _I used to tell my boss I am the only Buffalo Soldier officer there. But, I mean, what they went through but here is another case of why did we do what we did? Race was not a point as much as you doing your job. I mean, (inaudible) _____ and I am being facetious when I say _ (inaudible) _____ but not really. I guess I did not spend my

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time thinking about that. Now, you do. Over time . . . with Martin Luther King and some experiences that we look back, in retrospect, it was like taking a group of students here . . . my band was in the Battle of the Bands the last 4 years in Atlanta and I take the other students, not the band but the other students, and we got permission from the president that we can go like on Thursday _____ and we are taking them to the MLK Museum and around. And now, we lost so much of that because we actually (inaudible) _____. We were in Montgomery (inaudible) _____ and they are trying to actually understand. And we have 3 times (inaudible) _____ take a break. Before long, police are going to be called because then you have got 800 black kids, assembly, whatever, trying to use the restrooms (inaudible) _____ and sure enough, it happened this time, too, because there were so many people. Not anything negative, just a fact of life (inaudible) _____ make sure they are not stealing stuff and paying for everything.



IH: Is there anything specific that you identified with in King or X?

SW: Like I said, because I was primarily not living here, it was removed.

IH: Where were you at when King was assassinated? Were you in Vietnam?

SW: In Germany.

IH: In Germany? What was that like?

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SW: Actually, I remember when John F. Kennedy was killed, I was in Korea, and we went on high alert. And I could identify with him being killed, having been from Houston, like Dallas was a second home. I almost knew exactly where he got killed. But because of the reaction, we had to go in terms of _(inaudible) _____, we went on high alert then because of the assassination. But you still did not really know what was going on. Now, you would because you have email and all that that is real-time. It was not then. You had all those cranky phones to go through and you might get a chance to call home. You get all your news through other sources because it is interesting to see what comes out in international newspapers versus what comes out here. When Roots came out, as an example, I was stationed in The Netherlands and there was this little place I used to go to which was right next to almost where I lived and then my closest friend and now is my next door neighbor and the chief of police in the town I was living in _(inaudible) _____ came back and said, "Well, you know, we need to keep you here because it is dangerous in the United States to go back to Houston." And he _(inaudible) _____ gave you more insight to what was happening here and how a lot of the students today do not realize how great this country is, even those places over there where I was talking about, they are not that great. They are all good. And there are always expatriates. I do not care where I have been in this world, it does not take that long before you know where to go.

IH: Moving on to Vietnam, some of this is designed for NCOs so I will skip over those but in Vietnam, can you talk about your commanders and NCOs, what it was like when you were in Vietnam? The feeling of being in that environment over there. I

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guess maybe I should back up and ask you do you think we should have been in Vietnam?

SW: Yes, I mean, if you believe in the mission. Near the end is when it was bad because we were getting people hurt and then you were (inaudible) _____ so you needed to either make a decision to do it or not do it because (inaudible) _____ different things. But, you know, you worked together. Once you are there, (inaudible) _____ but more importantly is when you are going on (inaudible) _____. When you went on (inaudible) _____, that was totally black and white then because, like, for a long time, you could not go to Australia because there were racial rules, would not let blacks in. So, Australia was not a place that you could go. But like if you went to Hong Kong or any of those places -- I am talking about single now because I was still single -- because most married people, if they got a chance, they met their wives in Hawaii or they came back to the States in that timeframe. So, I ended up traveling to Hong Kong or Bangkok or other places. A couple of times, I was (inaudible) _____ as commander for a particular plane but then they went totally to (inaudible) _____, so if you went into Hong Kong, you had an all black environment, black clubs, the same thing, you know. Whether it is good or bad, I am not saying that. I mean, that is the (inaudible) _____. And when you got back to base camp sometimes, some of the things would come out that I would say (inaudible) _____ on a mission, all that went aside.

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SW: When you were doing a mission, you did not question it.

IH: Witness any type of self-segregation?

SW: Oh, yes.

IH: How come? Why do you think?

SW: You had choices. I mean, I am saying but you still are going to do what you are going to do. In one of your questions, you asked about me personally - who did I associate with? Well, in most cases, I was with more whites than I was blacks because, I kept saying as a bachelor . . . once I got married, because I was (inaudible) _____ when I got married. Then, that changed somewhat than the way we were because then, you went to married life and social circles. But even then, you tend to have certain things that all blacks go together and come together because all whites do the same thing, too. When you are outside the United States, you tend to live in a closer environment where you (inaudible) _____ Saudi Arabia where you all live in a compound. But, I mean, you still do your thing. [end of side 1]

IH: So, once you were married and you were socializing, was that a form of networking as well professionally, would you say?

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SW: Yes. I mean, there were certain things you had to do in terms of inviting certain people over and reciprocating those are all gone now but those were old school protocol then. On New Year's Day, there were mandatory. It was just like serving . . . Christmas and Thanksgiving. And then, I was in NATO assignments, so you end up with . . . my boss was Canadian and we were in German headquarters so there was only a handful of Americans. I used to play a lot of tennis up until I got out, so then I played in the tennis clubs.

IH: During your time in the military, again, like up to 1973, we probably went over this but I just want to go over it one more time - what was your experience with racial tension in regards to the OERs and things like that? Anything specific from that that you remember?

SW: They changed the rating, some that were geared towards what we have been talking about, to make it fair. Actually, 1972 through 1975, that is when I ended up being assigned to Hattiesburg, Mississippi ROTC at University of Mississippi, an all white school. No blacks. And I used to work with (inaudible) _____ the football and turned the whole program around. Of course, now it has changed but there was one _ (inaudible) _____ you are not really down here because you are black but yet, that is really what it was about. And in the end, I thought I was supposed to be doing something else. It worked out O.K. (inaudible) _____. She actually got a job down there _____. But I do not know if there is every a (inaudible) _____. It is not just the

military. And sometimes we are harder on each other than whites on black. Black on black is another issue.

IH: O.K. Can you talk about any experience you had with that?

SW: All I am saying is not just in the military but other places because sometimes even as blacks were honest with each other, we were doing the same things we were accusing the white man of doing but when it comes down to I am your boss and doing the evaluation (inaudible) _____ prior to you actually getting your real evaluation. It is an annual evaluation every 12 months. So, if you are in a particular place where it is stabilized, so 6 months out, I would just have the people who were responsible for rating, they would rate themselves and I would rate them with no inflation, meaning just as I see it. The whole idea was communications gap and trying to close it, not necessarily to be unfair or fair - it is so you know where we stand, so you have 6 months to correct that before the final evaluation comes up. Well, I did have a white guy who never had experienced that before and he had a problem with me. I thought I was going to have to put him in the psychiatric ward because he had never had anybody sit there and get what I was giving him. Then, I would, in turn, say, "O.K., you have a chance to tell me what we can do." (Inaudible) _____ and I do not see that sometimes. Even here, I do not see that. Some people just slam dunk people. It becomes personal.

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IH: And that kind of leads to one of my other questions: If you have any recollection of how whites under your command reacted to having a person of color assume leadership?

SW: (Inaudible) _____ and I think he was probably jealous of whites more than anything else (inaudible) _____ it turned out O.K. later on. He just did not know.

IH: Back to the OERs for a minute, what were the biggest problems that you saw with the OERs?

SW: Honesty, and it was the luck of the draw - who you worked for, I mean, up to a point. I mean, like the Army is a small branch. They do not need to put but one line on there and you are O.K., because everybody knows that when it comes to the promotion board. Do you know what I am saying? My point is, as large as the Army is, sometimes in having set up promotion boards, it gets small. I mean, what I am saying is that certain people know at some point in time. It has gotten better but still, so many words can be in there and they are saying nothing. Filling the space. Do you know what I mean? But one or two lines can be enough . . . sometimes it is so subjective even the 2's are better. I am not up to speed right now on what is going on right now but it basically has not changed that much. But only so many people can make it. It was just like a little _____ here but it is like lieutenants, and the pyramid gets up to here. And it depends on what your aspirations are. I think the key to efficiency reports is counseling. The report is finished. I mean, that is your obituary. It is done. Move on. If you are sincere on

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helping people, you ought to have a mentor, network and all that which is part of where we are weak. I should say I am weak. I do not want to talk about the rest of the world . . . because I always want to be an independent. But what we do, just like I tell students here now, "You need to network." That is something we can always improve on. "You move up, you bring people with you. Sponsor them. You try to help them." So, that is maybe not a direct question to the OER but it is sure linked. Do not wait until that time is due and then play donkey as opposed to telling you day-to-day what is going on.

IH: You said as you improve, you bring people with you.

SW: (Inaudible) _____. I try to be too independent but . . . that is how you get jobs. That is how when you get to the point for jobs, (inaudible) _____. It is who you know and who you recommend which leads to the efficiency report which leads to the promotion.

IH: So, when you say as more black officers will be coming field grade officers, that that obviously helped the junior grade officers, I mean, because you said someone who could give you the benefit of the doubt.

SW: Right.

IH: This is great. So, to become an effective leader from your career, what strategies did you develop personally? You mentioned trust?

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SW: Working. I mean, work - try to learn whatever it is you can, the best you can. I mean, no school ever teaches you that. I mean, you have got that old (inaudible) _____ you have got to go to certain schools but a school is a school. Yes, you learn but it is not like you . . . there is another way of doing it - the real world.

IH: Everywhere is experience.

SW: Yes.

IH: Did you have a mentor?

SW: I had bits and pieces. I had guys (inaudible) _____ because some of those that actually helped me the most ended up retiring (inaudible) _____, especially during the Vietnam era. And one of my squadron commanders had been in branch, so he knew all the nuances it took to get the things to do to get promoted. And he taught me to make sure you check your record every year - what is really on file. Do not wait because strange things happen. You know, especially then. And he told you . . . there were just certain things he taught you. Do this and that. And he was right. And I think it is more paramount now because of automation - to make sure that what is in the system is what you think it is. (Inaudible) _____ because people will like to you and say, O.K. . . . like in Vietnam, you did not have day-to-day, face-to-face, so your OER might have been done way out there in the jungle or someplace and you never saw it. (Inaudible) _____ it went through the system and it went back to Department of the Army,

where you did not have, at that point in time, a chance to have . . . if you got a copy of it,
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you did not know about it because they did not give you copies at some point in time. It was not up until after I got in that you actually were given a copy for yourself. Everything else went straight to the Department of the Army. You had two files: you had a promotion file as well as the field file, and the super secret file was the one that they made promotions on. It is kind of interesting when they had to release those things.

IH: What year did they release those?

IH: Was it in the 1970s?

SW: Yes, about the time when all the information things came out, you could not do this and you could not do that.

IH: Do you know D.R. Butler?

SW: Yes.

IH: Yes, I was going to say about his report, The Butler Report, about those OERs. We are almost finished, just 2 or 3 more questions. Again, we have already talked about this kind of but from your experience in the military, what were the biggest problems in the military in relation to being a person of color?

SW: (Inaudible) _____.

IH: So, that is what you would say - the military culture parallels what is happening in the civilian world?

SW: The military was ahead of the civilian life. I mean, I know it is. I mean, at least you had the opportunity where you would have had it in civilian life because like your peers that did not go in the military, people to this day think that all you do is go in the military and they are going to take care of you. You get all the time - I wish I had stayed so I could retire. Well, I mean, I did not intend to stay until I retired. I am talking about people making that comment to you, even to this day, that I would be sitting here now with my retirement. Well, that is fine but somebody has got to do it. Somebody has got to do it, whether it is the firemen, police, whatever - somebody has got to be in the military, too. That is your choice. But we have choices now. If anything, what has happened now, you have choices. The draft is not here and if it was not for the draft, I might have never stayed those 18 months. But I do not regret a day for staying. I think the key is right now, the opportunity is there, we just do not think it all the time. And it is an option. But when the military was shrinking at one time, that made it hard. When we were cutting back. Even at the end of Desert Storm, before that, they went through . . . they reviewed you every year for retention and active duty, particularly 05's and 06's, the passovers, and they were offering options to get out, packages. But then, you did not get a retirement. They give you . . . it is all good . . . a lump sum of X number thousands of dollars, and no retirement _(inaudible) ____ medical because they needed (inaudible) _____. And every year, this list came out, even just before Desert Storm started -

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we would get this list just before Christmas that said you had to be out by April or May, and that was tough. 05's and 06's. Because they were reducing it, the same thing with enlisted time. Because, like, as usual, history repeats itself and the next thing you know, you are going back the other way. You know, like right now, people are locked in.

IH: There was something I skipped over. I know you mentioned in Vietnam that you were an advisor. You obviously experienced combat. Did you get a Purple Heart? Can you talk about that for a few minutes?

SW: I got a Purple Heart.



IH: What unit were you in when you were in combat there?

SW: I was in the 101st Airborne when it was turned over to (inaudible) _____. That was in the 4th Division _ (inaudible) _____.

IH: And what years were you in Vietnam again?

SW: First was 1966 and I went back again in 1968 and stayed until 1971.

IH: That is a long time. 1968 to 1971?

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SW: When I started out my first tour, I was an advisor in the Delta. It was just me and one black NCO with a Vietnamese unit and then my last tour, because they were actually from extensions, I was a major then and I had my own team, _(inaudible) _____ cavalry unit which subsequently got wiped out after they pulled us all out. So, I got pretty close to those guys.

IH: I think there was a comment by an American advisor who said "How come our Vietnamese don't fight like their Vietnamese" talking about the ones in the north. Did it seem like that the Vietnamese in the south did not know what they were fighting for? I mean, obviously Vietnam was looking at it as a revolution.

SW: The unit I was in was the (inaudible) _____.

IH: A Vietnamese guy?

SW: The Vietnamese Army unit was just like a Vietnamese special forces or a special Airborne. They were special. So, you are talking about a different level than what you are talking about. We never were prepared though. I mean, I do not think it is a fair comparison because they knew what they were doing. I mean, they were united by the fact that that is what the mission is and they worked together as a team. And to be an effective advisor, you have got to blend in with them and you cannot be condescending.

You have got to do certain things. And no school can teach you because you are out

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there living with them. I did not even go to see the (inaudible) _____ unless I had to, unless my boss called me, the general officer . . . I stayed with them, you live with them.

IH: Were you in the northeast section?

SW: The first one, I was in the Delta. I was in the Delta when the 9th Division came in.

IH: From 1968 to 1970, did you volunteer to stay?

SW: Yes. I did. They offered an extension.

IH: How come? From the accounts I read, everyone is counting those days.

SW: Yes, but like I said, I was not married and I got a chance to see the world because they offered you . . . you could take whatever you wanted, a free ticket for 30 days of traveling. So, I went back to Europe again and different places, Beirut (inaudible) _____.

IH: That is amazing.

SW: But I did it because the guy that I mentioned to you that told me these are things

you need to do, he was the one who influenced me, he said, "This is going to pay off. It

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is worth it. Any merit (inaudible) _____ is worth it." And he influenced people doing that. And that is why. (inaudible) _____ to travel.

IH: This is your white commander?

SW: Yes.

IH: Man, I could talk to you for hours about that.

SW: He got me the assignment.

IH: Wrapping up, what do you feel people need to know about African Americans' military service during the Vietnam era that has not been told or written about?

SW: I mean, I do not know the number of blacks that lost their lives over there. It is tremendous and I am not sure (inaudible) _____ to what contribution they actually made in doing that as compared . . . and we stood during World War I and World War II, so there is no comparison to those. They are going through something similar now with Iraq but it is no comparison either. You could try to equate that but it is a different thing but we are losing a lot of lives. But it is interesting that you do not see pictures of black soldiers that are getting killed in Iraq.

IH: No, you don't.

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SW: Think about it - I mean, if you are just living here in Houston, Texas, you see Hispanic and whites . . . well, that is not quite right. Just the other day, there was an article but generally speaking, you do not see (inaudible) _____ you say, well are blacks getting killed? Yes, they are. _____ Vietnam caused a lot of loss of marriages and everything else because 10 years is a lot of time. Ten plus years. You've got back to back tours. I stayed away from getting married because I watched people who had been married for years and I used to baby-sit their kids and when they finally were able to spend some time together and figure out . . . they might be married 10 years but never really lived together because you were gone. You would come home, go to school, go back. Especially pilots. (inaudible) _____ Anybody at one point in time because it was so long. The other thing is, is even though the country is like 350 miles and what have you, it depends on where you were. Even in 1967, 1968 or 1969 - that is why I do not talk about it - it made a difference in where you were on what was going on. It was different. (Inaudible) _____ telling war stories.

IH: Obviously you were in combat arms. Did you associate an inordinate amount of black soldiers under your command, like, more than the 10% ?

SW: Oh, that kind of evolved. When I first went in, it was all white NCOs, for the most part. Lieutenant commanders and all those were white. I mean, (inaudible) _____ and it was still very few black enlisted. When I went in, when I went to Korea, my first platoon was 21 people and, for the most part, was all white. And then, that kind of evolved as Vietnam picked up. One unit I had was Polynesian because they

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were recruiting (inaudible) _____ that period of time. The Hispanics (inaudible) _____ were volunteering to come in anyway.

IH: For citizenship?

SW: And any kind of rollover, but still with (inaudible) _____ NCOs, it never really was totally . . . it would be when you get to (inaudible) _____ and your gunners and things like that, would be black as compared to the infantry unit.

IH: All right, well, I want to thank you for the interview, thank you for your time. Don't be surprised if I come back. Thank you.

