

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

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

**Interview with: General James Cheatham**

**Interviewed by: Isaac Hampton II**

**Date: June 25, 2007**

**Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola**

IH: Today's date is June 25 and I am interviewing Mr. James Cheatham at his home in Pennsylvania. Is it O.K. if I call you General?

JC: That is fine.



IH: O.K., General, can you state your date of birth and your full name?

JC: January 1949.

IH: And your full name?

JC: James A. Cheatham.

IH: And where are you from originally?

JC: Jasper, Texas.

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

IH: Can you tell me about what it was like growing up in Jasper, Texas, a little bit about your childhood and your parents?

JC: I grew up in sort of; it was not really a small town. Probably most of the time with my grandmother on a small farm. You worked hard. You learned, certainly, the values of how to be a citizen. Those basic values carried through I think in life. My parents all worked hard. It was just one of those things where you got up, went to work, whatever, and if you were a kid, you went to school and kept things going. I think their big desire was, being the oldest, to make sure that I went farther than they did in terms of education. So, I am pretty fortunate that my mom actually was valedictorian of her class. But, it followed up. And then I was valedictorian, too. It was one of those things that you stress having your education and learning.

IH: Was your school segregated or integrated?

JC: Mine was segregated. Probably the class right after my graduating class was the last class before they combined the schools.

IH: Do you have any recollection about your grandparents and maybe some things they tried to instill in you coming up as a young man?

JC: Well, yes, I know both my grandparents and they were certainly hard-working. I think the thing was do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I guess you would call it the golden rule. We were always taught that. For example, I remember

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

going to a store and if we found something, a coin or something laying around, you would pick it up and you would take it back in the store, and say "I found this," and if they gave it to you, then that was fine but you just did not take it. So, it was kind of one of those lessons in doing right.

IH: For your grandparents and great-grandparents, were they descendants of slaves or anything like that?

JC: You know, I really do not know. I would suspect so but I do not really know. I never care to talk about that.

IH: Yes, I know for a lot of us African Americans, it is a painful time to think about, you know, that a lot of folks do not really want to talk about that either. Coming up under segregation and stuff like that, I guess it was maybe . . . Jim Crow (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_ was probably coming to an end around that time but as far as role models and symbols of masculinity, like some of the folks had listed Muhammad Ali or Jim Brown or maybe your grandparents or some military person you saw on TV, what was a sign of masculinity for you coming up?

JC: That is a good question because all I remember is my folks. I think in pre high school, I am trying to think of what I remember. I think probably the closest thing outside of family might have been maybe the high school principal was always, you know, (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_ as one that sort of stood out. Obviously, at that young age,

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

your teachers have a big impact on you. And so, I had a cousin who taught agriculture for the school. I always remember my first and second grade teachers. That person certainly within us instilled . . . I believe she had taught my mother, but certainly instilled the desire that, you know, you needed to learn and here is why, you need to go forth and got to do better and keep going. It was probably more even the competitive thing she put into us, saying, hey look, (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_ the desire to compete.

IH: The desire to compete. O.K. So, do you feel with that being instilled in you at a young age that it played a big part in your military career, I mean, obviously making it to the rank of major general? That is a tremendous accomplishment, particularly for a person of color.

JC: I think in the early years, what they do is it is a foundation in terms of getting started in life and school and work and learning the values. And I think the traditional values -service, respect, honor, duty and all that, certainly, I think set a foundation because as you grew older, let's say, and you got through high school and you found out that the classes grew larger because we had a central high school that was fed by a couple of elementary schools, when you combined that at 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, there were a lot more kids coming from places you had around, for us being a small community, you had not interacted with before. And so, you had to learn to get along and move on and work together. But that did not take much because then you ended up competing in sports and different events. The same push continued through high school. I think that was probably the big thing that keeps you going. But for some reason, I can recall I

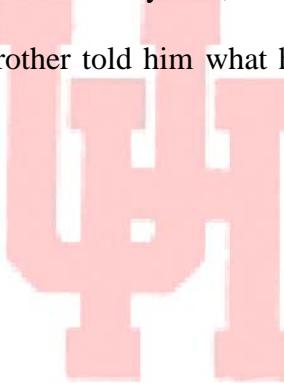
**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

always had the distinct desire that I hated to let somebody down who wanted to see you succeed and let you know that they were behind you and could put you in positions.

Once in high school, I can recall the principal, it was a summer job and the principal had gotten me that job with the Jasper Finch Company, I recall, and it was tough work. I learned the business pretty fast, worked for this guy who was not exactly overenthused but what I learned was that he knew that I worked for, and I did not really understand . . . I got along and I did the work and when I graduated and moved on and went to college, my brother came behind me. My brother and this person happened to be hiring for another job as part of the school system, and what happened was that person was interviewing folks and my brother told him what his name was, he said, "You are hired."

IH: O.K.



JC: There weren't any questions asked. He understood that, wait a minute, you are his brother and he worked (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_, he had the confidence that he would, too.

IH: O.K., so you blazed the trail for somebody else already.

JC: Right and I think that goes to say that, you know, people who went before us at times blazed the trails. You talked about some of the folks like Muhammad Ali and I think I am probably getting ahead of you here to talk about the Civil Rights Movement.

IH: Yes, we can talk about that. You graduated high school in 1968 or 1969?

JC: I graduated in 1967.

IH: So, you came out about the same time as my dad did. Talk about growing up during the Civil Rights era, I mean, particularly as a young teen, what was that like and what impact did that have on you, your outlook on life?

IH: Well, I think the thing that, since we were pretty much at the time that I grew up in the early teens, it was obviously a very segregated society and the things you saw on TV, we actually kind of lived some of that. But you knew there was this . . . you learned to survive or you learned to work through that and move on. And I think the biggest impact that did not come probably to real fruition until when I was in college . . . I think it was when Martin Luther King got killed. I can remember the day when Kennedy was killed. I was sitting in English class. Then, later on, I remember Martin Luther King and that is when things sort of erupted around the country. Actually, I can remember the night, things were kind of getting out of hand on college campuses and across communities, and a friend of mine . . . I remember he was one of my hometown guys, he was a class ahead of me and, of course, I am a young, either freshman or sophomore, he grabs me, "You don't need to get involved in that. Back off. Come back here and stay out of this stuff." It was probably good advice, the way things went. But I remember distinctly, yes, you can see things . . . I can remember when there used to be . . . the sign would say colored entries only, you went this way versus that way and those types of things. So, there were these adverse conditions or adverse things but I think you learned

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James****Interview: June 25, 2007**

that, O.K., that is the way it is now but in the future, you know, who knows, and you keep working towards a goal and making a way for yourself. Hopefully, those who went before you, obviously, some of them made a way and opened doors because by the time that I reached . . . we got to be juniors and seniors, you know, there were things that started to open up and there were people looking to hire . . . there was this push to increase the minority in certain job classifications or whatever. And being an engineer, I remember companies were coming to our campuses and doing the interviews. You had, I do not remember the number of interviews you went to with companies and you sort of had a choice. Now, you obviously had to be able to perform and you had to have the right credentials to do that.

IH: O.K., now during the Civil Rights Movement and you were coming out of high school in 1967, the Black Power Movement was starting to gain momentum in 1968, what is your recollection of that and what were your feelings about these so-called black militants then, like Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, that type of thing, Stokely Carmichael?

JC: I remember some of that. And I don't know, it was kind of like I needed mine, I need it now, you had it all these years and you could feel for that side saying, take what is mine. Then, there was the other side that represented let's do it in a peaceful manner. And maybe, as a young person, you sort of think you sided with the power side, the other side. For some reason, I think I was still led to where King was, probably on that side. And I think I have to say that having folks or classmates or people I knew that were

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

certainly older and a little bit wiser, kind of, well, I don't want to say kept you in check but it kept you . . . hey, advice, you need to look at it from a different viewpoint maybe, stand back here and do not go jumping into something you do not need to be in the middle of. But it certainly is an era and I know I had classmates that . . . I remember one who one of the leaders, the class president was or whatever but, you know, they were protesting and doing things. But eventually, I think they were level-headed enough that things came back into perspective for us in that where we were located.

IH: What were your parents' positions during this time on the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement? Did they give you any advice?

JC: I cannot really know except I am sure that they were probably more towards King's philosophy if anything, and that might have been more or less, let's not rock the boat, because you have to think about it, in that part of the world, the country at that time, you worked for the majority. Your whole job was depending on that. You had to be able to walk the fine line.

IH: O.K., so that could mess up your livelihood if you were out there protesting too much?

JC: That is right. Now eventually and, of course, I was long gone, and my home town, you never think of it, a number of years back, there was even a minority, a black mayor, and people on the City Counsel when I was growing up and that probably may be

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James****Interview: June 25, 2007**

certainly still, you know, people are involved with it. In fact, I think one of my classmates ended up . . . I don't know if he is on the City Counsel or not. I know one of the individuals, an engineer that graduated. . . in fact, I saw him this past weekend . . . he was in the city leadership at one time.

IH: O.K., so, now, after high school, you graduated as valedictorian. How did you wind up at PV, Prairie View?

JC: Well, it was sort of one of those things that I can tell you . . . when I graduated . . . in my hometown, you think of it as the wood mills and the and lumber mills and all those were a big deal. So, you basically graduated, people went to work in the mills. And I practically was headed in that direction. But my grandmother had the foresight to say . . . she knew the principal real well and she said, "You find a way to get him in school. Make sure he goes to school." So, what I did was (inaudible) friend of mine, the classmate, we ended up working . . . he was putting . . . Prairie View, got summer jobs between when my fall semester started in Prairie View, and then we ended up working, actually working at the campus and taking maybe some summer classes or something like that, preclasses or something, and working through. So, what we did was get an inside early. So, once you got into the school and we worked . . . because the classes ahead of me, some of my friends ahead of me, a number of us all went into engineering. So, I followed suit.

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James****Interview: June 25, 2007**

IH: O.K. Now, did you feel a sense of urgency to get into college because of the draft and the Vietnam War going on then?

JC: You know, I am not sure that I did at the time. I just know that I just went in. I mean, I went to school but the big impact was I think after being there, there was a friend, high school classmate, very, very smart young man, and I remember he decided he was not going to school. I think one year or so later, it might have been during my sophomore year, he was killed in Vietnam. When I went to school, ROTC was mandatory, so we are already in ROTC and I remember a number of us. And I can remember one other friend who we still call each other today, Wilfred Scott, he and I taught and he tried very hard to get Raymond to go to school, Raymond Wooden. So, we ended up going to his funeral. So, that touched all of us pretty hard that were there. So, we went back and were in ROTC. Once you were in, you wanted to finish. That is when we had the lottery numbers and the draft, whatever, the draft numbers. So, that is when I ended up signing up for, we signed up for advanced ROTC. That allowed us to finish the next 2 years of school. And by doing that, of course, we finished school but at the end, we were commissioned for second lieutenants when we graduated. But along with that, moved on past that, we still were allowed to go to work and went to officer basic. But, by that time also, the Vietnam War was winding down.

IH: Were you guys commissioned as reserve officers or regular Army, do you remember?

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

JC: I think they were commissioned as reserve officers.

IH: As far as the ROTC program, was the Navy ROTC program happening then at PV?

JC: Yes, it was.

IH: O.K. Was the Army option more attractive than the Navy option?

JC: Well, the Army was there first. The Navy came along . . .

IH: I think it was right at 1967, wasn't it, because the first class was 1971, as I remember. I am pretty sure.

JC: I thought the Army was there . . . I thought the Navy came in after I got there. Maybe it was the year after or something. I am not exactly sure. So, you know, I don't know, you started out anyway, you ended up in the Army, so we stayed with that.

IH: Looking back and this is in the late 1960s, do you feel that from graduating from an HBCU gave you something that a traditional white ROTC program or OCS would not have instilled in you?

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

JC: I do not really know. I think it must be something there but I do not really know.

I do not have a clear answer for that.

IH: Maybe something along the lines of representing the race because you came from a traditionally black college, do you have any sense of that, was that in the air, or maybe something that was understood but not spoken in the ROTC ranks?

JC: I am not sure. The reason I am thinking is our class, the ROTC cadets that came out of there, a number went on to do very well. So, I think the basic foundation or, if anything, you may have that there was the cadre or the (inaudible) took the time to certainly give you the right skills, or certainly took the time to make sure that they imported to you what they had been through and what you would face going on. I can recall very vividly that the sergeant told us, he said, "Look, when you graduate as lieutenant, you don't know everything when you get a unit." That is how true it is.

IH: Learn from the NCOs.

JC: Yes, the head NCO will train you.

IH: Now, when you were commissioned, my understanding is that Prairie View was it infantry . . . no, the officers that came from there were commissioned into the infantry branch. Was that true?

JC: No, I was commissioned to the Corps of Engineers.

IH: O.K., so they changed that.

JC: Yes, the infantry was probably a predominant one but I know I was Corps of Engineers, another close friend in high school, he was infantry, another one was military police. I am trying to think of what the other ones were. I do not remember. I think one was Medical Corps or something.

IH: O.K., so you graduated PV in 1972?

JC: 1971.

IH: So, since the war was winding down . . .

JC: Yes, so what happened, when I graduated, we were allowed to . . . I went to work for the Federal Highway Administration, starting in September. I graduated in August of 1971 because of the ROTC. And then, in September of 1971, I went to work for the Federal Highway Administration, the first assignment in Tennessee, and then, in 1972, in June of 1972, I was called to active duty and that was also a basic course at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and was there for, up until, I think September. Then, I released, went back to work and from then on, it was work and reserves pretty much.

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

IH: O.K. Concerning Vietnam, what were your feelings about that war? Did you feel that the United States should have been there or should not have been there or were you just totally focused on this is the mission?

JC: Well, I am not sure I can say whether we should have been there or not been there. What I remember or recall, and there is a book that probably explained it better than I can. Colonel Summers.

IH: Yes, Harry G. Summers.

JC: And actually, his son was in the unit with me. I thought he probably touched on those things, you know, a lot of the things there were pretty well. The impression, of course, of the population is that we probably maybe lost the war but not really. I mean, militarily-wise, we won a lot of the battles and won things. It was a more political influence that probably dictated which direction, how things went. More so than anything else.

IH: O.K. Did you ever meet Colonel Summers?

JC: No, I did not meet him.

IH: I know he died a few years ago. All I have is his book. Rising through the ranks all the way up to General, I mean, that is a tremendous journey. Can you talk about any

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

types of racial tension that you may have experienced or anything like that along the way?

JC: That is another one of your questions . . . I am trying to think.

IH: And if not, that is good.

JC: Well, you know, I think the one thing that stands out was before commissioning, was at the time that I was in ROTC summer camp. That was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. There was this one cadet that probably did not like the idea of comingling but the way it was handled was we were all one platoon and we were housed in tents. We lived in the field so we were in big platoon tents. Most of the time, unless we went out on maneuvers, then we were in smaller pup tents. But, you know, it took him a while to come around and really, it was peer pressure. That was the first time I kind of really faced that, and maybe that was the lesson learned that we saw that. But there were others, you know, obviously there were . . . there might have been one or two blacks at the most in the whole thing, in the platoon I was in. So, everybody else basically accepted it. We were there together in the same conditions and you worked. But I remember that one being one . . . it took him a lot to come around and accept it, and peer pressure was probably the big thing. I had probably been, in most cases, probably up until I was brigade commander . . . maybe the battalion and one or two others. But for the most part, I guess I never thought about it because as I always worked in a very . . . being maybe the only one, in whatever position I was in or whatever in those jobs, if you

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

performed and you knew what you were doing and competent, could handle, and you were effective and you got along with people, then they pretty well respected that. And I did not run into any real major issues that I can recall that stand out at me right at the moment. I am sure there must have been some behind the scenes or whatever but, you know, I think of it in terms of coming along when I was company commander . . . actually, I was on battalion staff first and the colonel asked me to go down and take a company. And so, I did. I was not supposed to be there that long but it ended up being 2-1/2 years. We turned the company around and led the unit, battalion, pretty much everything. And then, I ended up being moved to Chicago, from Indiana to Chicago. When I got there, obviously having been in the reserves, the lucky thing is I had friends that were also in the same unit that also worked with me in the civilian world that knew me. And so, that made that transition fairly easy. And you picked up a few mentors, as long as you did your job. And that makes a difference when these folks are a lot higher than you are . . . to show you the ropes and suggest that you do certain things, i.e., military-wise, those that require certain education steps as you progress in rank. And so, as you do that, you have to do that through an assignment and once you performed. And so, I never thought that I would ever get to this rank but those things, as long as I kind of kept doing the right things, it worked out.

IH: As far as your mentors, anyone in particular that had a major impact on you? Another black officer or somebody like that?

JC: You know, I do not know that I have ever worked for a black officer.

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James****Interview: June 25, 2007**

IH: Can you talk about networking throughout your career because one of the things I have heard is once you get past the rank of major, it becomes very political. One thing that somebody had mentioned to me at one time was once you get past the rank of major, it becomes very political.

JC: Well, I do not know if it is very political but what we probably sometimes miss is that there are social functions, military traditional functions and things that happen, that go on, and in active duty, there is no doubt you are going to be required to attend those.

But even in the reserves and whatever, there are functions and you as a young officer need to go to them. What they are is, you know, because they want to see the other side to see how you interact on a different plane, on another side versus strictly in the duty arrangement, so to speak, I think. But it is that you are able to converse and certain participate in those types of functions. It is not unlike the corporate world - the same types of things. In fact, it is funny you asked that. I was just talking to a young person.

This guy was an officer, NCO, at some function likely, and I was advising him that "You need to participate in these types of functions and go to it." And he picked up on it right away, he said, "Yes, you are right," in order to advance and go ahead. So it is that type of thing, I think, as you move forward. There is a point in time you do not want to have to do that but I think early on in your career, certainly you want to participate because as you move forward, you become the person who has to orchestrate some of those. That is also a learning experience. And there are a lot of things that are done on functions even the sporting athletic functions. I mean, obviously there are times when the group goes to play golf or goes to do whatever. And maybe if you play golf or play tennis or whatever,

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

and the boss plays golf, I guess you join the group because a lot more goes on, on that golf course. So, you know, I think that is so similar to that. Relations are everything, to some degree. And that is parallel, very parallel, not unlike the corporate world the way things work. It took me a while to understand it. I really did not understand that.

IH: O.K., so you became a good golfer?

JC: Yes, as I grew older, you know, the word sometimes comes down that it is a mandatory function, so, you know, you have to be there then. They wanted to make sure they had their crowd. But there are times you are not advised of that but you sort of have to know that, I need to go. And besides, if you are the leader of a unit, once you get battalion size or brigade size or whatever, and go to all those functions, you want to be able to encourage and pull folks in and have them participate, whatever, in that type of thing. It is going to go full circle if you go there long enough. And that working, let's say, not unlike some of the (inaudible) as you get higher, those functions where commanders or people in very influential positions also come to those functions, that may be the first time you rub elbows with him. And you get a chance to converse and ask questions, whatever. And you would be surprised that someone says, "Yes, I remember you." Of course, that can work both ways.

IH: Yes, if you had a bad moment - "I remember you!"

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

JC: I think the other piece of that is the spouses at a certain level play a role in this whole thing. Your spouse also has to be certainly aware and have an ability to communicate and function and socialize.

IH: O.K. That is interesting. Staying on the same track of talking about fairness and things like that, with the promotion system, particularly as we get into the OERs, can you talk about the OERs and if you thought they were fair? Did they suffer from inflation? I guess, it would be 1967-1968?

JC: It is not the 1967 . . . it used to be 67-8, 67-9, but the OERs, I do not know if I ever too much worried about that what I think, if I have to advise someone, I advise them as long as you perform, do your job, understand what you have to do and if you do not and things are not working, you have to communicate to the boss long before that is due. And if you are doing the right things, it will take care of itself. I can tell you personally I can recall one time, my superior officer \_\_\_\_\_ a new one came in and I was already in the command spot at the time . . . indicated, try and get some sense of what you are thinking and what you think you are worth or what the rating might want to be. I plainly say, "Sir, if I am doing the right thing and the right job, you write me just as fair as you would write anybody else. That is all I ask." I was not worried about awards or anything else. And he was fair. There are others in some cases . . . sometimes you have got to be on your P's and Q's and you have got to make sure that you are doing what is necessary because somebody can throw an iron in the fire or do something different that can give the wrong impression to folks and obviously you can get messed up. Now, the key to

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

advancement part of that, at least up until this point, is getting the young officer, he or she, whatever, in the right positions. By right positions, I mean those positions as operations officer or XOs, the unit command positions. Because right now, most people that sit on boards have gone through those same spots. And they, in turn, look to those jobs. One example is battalion command, for the most part, is being kind of a key and folks having had battalion command; you probably had a better chance of going up the chain. You obviously needed a couple more spots but the battalion command is key at the early on. You need to stay the full . . . I advised young folks, "Don't let them pull you out of there because they think you are a hot shot before your 24 months or 18 months," \_\_\_\_\_ stay there long enough to get that. And I was given the same advice when I was two stars long ago, too. And I heard him tell me, "You need to stay there," because he understood what was happening at the higher levels when they would review files and as your promotion for advancement. I really did not know . . . no one formally said they were your mentor or anything but I know that as I moved from company command and went to staff at an income level at the time and worked as a captain major and I was on some pretty high profile projects, and as long as I met the (inaudible) did my job real well, whatever, people noticed. And the right people put the right information . . . you know, they are telling the higher higher-ups, "Hey, this kid is doing great, doing well." They kind of pick you - here is a star - coming along. It goes a long way. Then, you end up being . . . and they say, "Well, Jim, I think you ought to start thinking of going to be battalion command and I want you to take this class, this course, and start to do these types of things." And so, if you do those things, these people are paying attention, it works out. Then, from that point, with my civilian job, I moved around a while. I moved

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

from one command to the next. Well, those two stars, it is a small pyramid at the top out there - they know each other. They communicate to each other, too, and they pass information on. And I ended up being . . . I was battalion commander when I left the job, in one command and ended up in another command before I was done with that. And so, things turned out to actually work out real well. Fortunately, I ended up working for a person who I knew in another location ended up being my boss at another location because they changed, too. And so, that just happened to work out. And then, this other person . . . people asked me to go do something else, I recall, from being battalion commander to be group XO. Well, my two star at that time says, "(inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_, you are not going to be the group XO, you are going to be on the (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_ staff and here is what you have got to do." I did not argue. I said, "Yes, sir." Obviously, he knew better. And what it turns out, you know, the next thing I know, I went from being, one year later, a lieutenant colonel, to a full blown colonel. The next thing I know, from there, they told me, "Well, I think it is time you need to go look for a group command." So, the next thing I know, I am commanding a (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_ group. The next thing I know, I am moving through to brigade commander, full BG.

IH: As far as writing OERs and things like that, how did your officers to write them or what kind of counseling did you give or did you learn about writing OERs and how to evaluate your junior officers?

JC: I am trying to think. I do not know that I ever fully trained them. I think what happens is there are writing courses or writing . . . in fact, there are books on how to write

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James****Interview: June 25, 2007**

OERs, \_\_\_\_ OERs or awards or whatever even for the enlisted folks. And people know that and they pick up on that. But the form . . . are you familiar with the form?

IH: Up to the 1967-7. I think I have 8. That is the highest one I have. I know they have changed.

JC: Yes, they are pretty much the same. They just moved a few things around. So, it is not all that difficult. And people think of writing, on the back side of those, between you and I, and I was told that I did not learn it . . . in fact, it was a few years ago or whatever, that you had to write . . . people tried to write a book. Well, you do not have to do that. I found out that general officers, if their rating you, they are not to say but a few words and \_\_\_\_\_ write a few words. That is all it takes.

IH: That is all it takes, O.K., so there is like a secret coding going on in there, I guess.

JC: Well, you know, think about it. When you are coming along and you are captain or major out there, when a board meets, they are looking at thousands of files and they do not have but a very, very short time to look at your file. And they are looking to see that first impression and it should be where that photo came in quite, you know, was a big part of it. How you looked in the photo and whether you had at least decent OERs. If you had something in there that was the other way that made their decision too quick and too easy.

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

IH: O.K. What about inflation of the OERs? Was that a problem? Have you seen that as being a problem?

JC: Well, you know, I do not know that that . . . it might have been more of a problem on the AC side versus the reserve guys. As far as I know, they rated pretty hard. But the Army itself in total tried to . . . they looked into that issue, and what it is now is you do a profile . . . your rating officer (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_ profile and that profile, you can only rate in the rank . . . you only can have, I think it is less than 50% maybe in each grade or whatever in your top profile. And everything else is . . . [end of side 1]

. . . even across the board and they are very fair across the board. You can see that. You are looking at . . . he says, this guy is a hard rater. If he rates you this way, you must be up here when you compare to these guys.

IH: When you made brigadier general, can you talk about what process is like, when you make it to that level of the officer corps?

JC: When you say "process," you mean?

IH: As far as when you are a full colonel, I mean, what happens at that stage when you are up for brigadier general? I am sure there is a brigadier general's board but do they prep you a certain way for that?

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

JC: No, it goes before a board. Your file goes before a board. And so, that board is made up obviously of senior general officers that review the file, what you have done on record, the whole works. It is pretty well screened. It is screened before you get to the board. You have to be qualified. You are not going to get there otherwise because it is prescreened. They look at your file and it is based on what they think, what has been said about you and whatever, blah, blah, blah, and what they think your potential qualifications are. The decision is made based on that. Once you get to that, you still have to go before the senate and have senate confirmation. So, it is a nomination process where the Secretary of Defense nominates you, once the board I think nominates you to go to the president, the president then nominates you to the senate, to the Congress and they have to buy off on it. If somebody does not concur, you could be out.

IH: So, when you go up for a general, is there a primary and a secondary zone for that and if a person gets passed over the first time, do you get a second shot once you reach the rank of general?

JC: Yes, you do, because if you are a colonel, you can go before it I think at least twice. Maybe. I am not sure of that. So, there probably is you can go before, I believe more than once. I am trying to think if I have seen anybody go that I know. There is kind of a point where people figure if they did not make it, that is it. And by that time, they are pretty close to . . . there is an age limit and time lines, too, that.

IH: You can't go past 20 unless you are regular Army?

JC: You can go past 20.

IH: Oh, you can? O.K. Or maybe it is lieutenant colonel and you have to . . .

JC: Well, yes, there is . . . I forgot that at the moment, but let's say it was like 20 years . . . it is kind of like 20 years at this grade and service and 30 years at this grade and service. That is public knowledge someplace that is out there. Some of that has changed I think lately but pretty much, yes, you know that if you . . . it is like 28 years in service maybe I think was a colonel and you knew you were done, whichever one came first or you hit certain milestones. Once you get promoted, it extends that timeline.

IH: How much time was it between brigadier general and major general for you?

JC: I believe it was 2002.

IH: O.K., that is pretty impressive.

JC: Well, think of it as . . . I went before the board in 1999 but it took one year to get through the whole process. What it is, you can make it but you can be sitting on a list because they can only have so many general officers. There is a number, there is a cut. So, until somebody retires and moves, then you cannot get promoted.

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James****Interview: June 25, 2007**

IH: Looking back on your career, what type of special strategies did you develop to become an effective leader? I mean, obviously you developed very many, you know, going to major general. Is there anything in particular that has served you extremely well over the years?

JC: You said business strategy; I think that is what you mean? I think the thing that probably was the biggest thing was it is just like you are given an assignment and always my goal was to meet or exceed the goals of the assignment. And as long as I did that, met the performance and, at the same time, I think you have to look at it as saying I always expected my people to do what was right and I would respect them for what they were, whoever they are, and I would not ask them to do anything I would not do and set the example, i.e., if there was something . . . we were getting ready to move maneuvers and load trucks or whatever and if I have gotten the planning and everything else done and we are working . . . if I walk out and they need help, I did not hesitate to jump in and do it. They would say, "Sir, you don't have to do this," but no . . . if you are in the field . . . what they want to know . . . you would be surprised that they know that you are human, that you will bend over and work . . . most of all, you would take care of them. And I always told my people, the first time (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_ I would talk, say who I am, and somewhere along the line, you do your job, I will take care of you and you take care of me - we will be all right.

IH: O.K., the strategy is take care of your people?

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James****Interview: June 25, 2007**

JC: Yes, you have got to take care of your people and set the example, respect them for who they are and what they can do. You know, you look at something that is going on and you have got strengths and you have got weaknesses. And what I tend to do is O.K., you get things moving in the right direction and I tend to move towards, O.K., how can I improve the weakness blink and bring that up, and enhance that? Whether it might be training, whether it might be whatever. If you concentrate and show . . . and everything kind of pulls and moves forward . . . that what you are desiring usually does . . . I have been lucky that I commanded and worked with people that whatever it took to do the job at the time, we usually \_\_\_\_\_. Now, there were some folks you figured out real fast who works and who doesn't. There is a way to try and move those along and help out. But it is usually in an organization that there are 20% that are doing the most. The other 80% may not.

IH: Almost done here, wrapping up - maybe one other question or so. From your experience and, again, you came in at the end of the Vietnam era, but did you see any particular problems in the military in relation to being a person of color?

JC: I think previously I would say very definitely. I think if you are a person of color, you are going to have to prove yourself over and beyond. You have got to go farther and do better than the average to beat the average. I do not think that has probably changed over a number of years.

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

IH: My great-grandfather told me a long time ago, he said, "Ikey, if you want to compete, you have to be twice as better as a white man. That is just the way it is." I did not really understand what he was saying but I remember it very well because he was serious with me. I must have been 5 years old when he told me that. So, yes, it kind of sticks with you.

JC: Well, sometimes you have got to find a way to get your foot in the door. It is probably not always going to be the most desirable spot or position and you are going to have to take that one to get to the next one, the one you really want and work through that.

IH: O.K., and the last question if my phone holds up here, what do you feel people need to know about African Americans' military service during the Vietnam era, or let's just say during your tenure that you have served and are serving that people do not know or has not been written about? Anything in particular that you have seen that people have just not recognized about African Americans' service in the military?

JC: Well, I guess I don't know that it is always the Vietnam era when I think of the entire military service. See, I think the person who probably brought a lot to the limelight was probably Colin Powell when he brought out . . . pushed the awareness of the Buffalo Soldier. And I think we need to look back at that because my grandfather was . . . I did not know this until I was actually . . . I don't remember if I was a general or colonel at the time that I remember, and it did not mean much to me when he passed because I was

**Interviewee: Cheatham, James**

**Interview: June 25, 2007**

probably 5 or 6 years old, but his tombstone had on there . . . he was a private in World War II, but it turns out he was in the 20th Engineers. At least, that is what they had on his tombstone. And so, I have not researched it enough to know the history. I know there is a 20th Engineers because I interviewed the corps and I know the history of some of the engineers and I talked to a few. In fact, I got his booklet from the Historian Today in the Corps and I have not looked through those. They sent it to me. But who would have ever thought that you would have a great-grandfather, and probably we all, too, were pretty well segregated, that was in the Engineer Corps, and a private, and has a grandson now who is a two star?



IH: Wow, what a legacy! That is making progress. That is pretty impressive. So, you have been in the Engineering Corps the whole time?

JC: Yes, I was a commissioned engineer the whole time. I think there were only a couple of spots. One, I was assigned my first assignment in reserves . . . well, in the reserve unit, was in a transportation unit, 17, 18, transportation. I was only there maybe 3 months or so before I got yanked and put in the engineer unit. And then, I currently serve outside the Engineer Corps in the (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_ command. Otherwise, I was in Engineer.

IH: Have they sent you to Iraq yet?

JC: No.

IH: Do you see any parallels between Iraq and Vietnam?

JC: I haven't thought about it.

IH: That's O.K.

JC: That is a loaded question.

IH: Yes. We can delete that from the interview. O.K., well, General, I am going to stop the tape recorder now.

