RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM NEAL BROWN

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Allison Mueller: This begins an interview with Dr. William Neal Brown, on February 25, 2005 with Allison Mueller, Fernando Palma and Shaun Illingworth in Millburn, New Jersey.

Shaun Illingworth: Dr. Brown, thank you very much for having us here today and for your hospitality in giving us lunch. Thank you.

Fernando Palma: We would like to begin by asking when and where you were born.

William Neal Brown: I was born in Warrenton, Georgia, February 24, 1919.

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about your father, where he was from and what he did for a living?

WB: I had to fill out a questionnaire recently that asked me, what did my father do for a living? I think the one that I sent back to you. [Dr. Brown is referring to the pre-interview survey] My father … grew up on a farm and then he came to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, where I grew up. He was a farmer and a steel cutter in the steel mill.

SI: How long had his family been farming in Georgia?

WB: Since 1863; his father was an ex-slave. He grew up on a farm.

SI: What about your mother's family and her background?

WB: My mother was, I know very little about her family, my mother was a Native American and her family lived on an Native American reservation near Warrenton.

SI: Which tribe did she belong to?

WB: That I don't know.

FP: Do you know how they met?

WB: No, I don't know how they met. It's like they were trying to hide it from me all my life, the fact that my mother was a Native American.

SI: How old were you when you moved to Pennsylvania?

WB: I was five.

SI: Do you have any memories of living in Georgia?

WB: Yes. … I have just one picture in my mind. I was in the field with a woman, and I think that must have been my mother, and I think we must have been out there, supposedly, picking cotton, but I have that one memory of my life in Georgia. I don't remember much about it. I didn't go to school until I got to Pennsylvania. … It was just five years that I lived with my mother, who lived with her mother and father, and my father had gone to look for work in

Pennsylvania. Through the years, as I've looked in the history of the country, there were numerous troubles in the steel industry about that time. … There was a fact that the mills would send people down south to recruit workers and, sometimes, all they did was tell them they're hiring in Aliquippa, or they're hiring in Ambridge, and people would leave what they were doing, which was not very profitable for them, and move in Pennsylvania to work in the heavy industry.

SI: So when your father moved to Pennsylvania he went right into the steel industry.

WB: He worked for forty years in Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation in Aliquippa.

SI: Do you know if he belonged to a union?

WB: Oh, yes. The men who worked in the mills had a union, but it was not the usual kind of union where the union would be at odds with the administration in favor of the workers. There were benefits that they got, but it was not a usual union. I think the so-called union was started by Jones & Laughlin. He did belong to that and there were some days when there was no work for him. [They would] have to come home for that day and then they go to the mill and they'd be given two or three days. … On your payday it's gonna be for two weeks. How come you only got three days? They always give you enough to pay your insurance so that your insurance is constant. So, it's tough.

SI: Did you have any siblings?

WB: Oh, yes. I was the oldest of … five brothers and sisters. There were six all tolled. I was the oldest. There were four girls and two boys. The oldest and the youngest were boys.

AM: Do you have any memories of your childhood in Pennsylvania? What was your childhood like growing up?

WB: Oh, economically it was tough, but by this way the mill would arrange that they had enough days to keep their insurance and they had, in Aliquippa, what they called the company store. … There's a folk singer who sings the song about, "You know you owe your life to the company store" [Dr. Brown is referring to "Tennessee" Ernie Ford]. Well, you could go to the company store and get food, or clothes, or whatever you needed and it would be taken out of your pay. So it was a tough childhood, but I enjoyed my childhood and if you look at that questionnaire that I sent back to you, you will see that my brothers and sisters didn't. My brother and I are the only two who even went near a college. Oh, I forgot, my sister, Margie, finished the same one as I did. … My father used to leave home and say to my mother, "If I'm not back by eleven o'clock, make me a jelly sandwich," and sometimes that sandwich would be made on a biscuit, not a loaf of white bread or Italian bread, on a biscuit, and I [would] take it to the mill and my father would meet me at the gate of the mill and he either had the lunch that I had brought, or he would go back home with me; they weren't gonna work that day. … I don't know what else to tell you. I had a wonderful childhood because I always loved school and I loved to be number one. … Our church [deacon] came to my father one Sunday and asked him if he would mind if he gave me a little job. My father, who, [it] is tough in our family, he needed me

to have a little job. This guy says, “It won’t keep you from going to school; it won’t keep you from doing any chores that you have. All that you had to do is go down to Logstown,” which is another part of Aliquippa, “and bring an envelope back to my office.” He ran a printing company, Mr. Phelps and his son. The son went to Carnegie Tech [Carnegie Institute of Technology] and became a very good professional printer, but the father had just put up the money and built a shack out behind his house and Wilbur Phelps would do printing there for people who had stores along the avenue. So I’d go and pick this envelope up everyday and take it back to the Phelps’ printing office. One day I noticed that there was a little jingle, I wasn’t shaking the envelope, but as I walked along, I’d hear a tinkle. So I said, "I wonder what’s in this envelope that I’m picking up." So there was no one to ask, I wasn’t gonna ask the person who had given me the job. So one day I took the time to stop, sit on the curb, open the envelope and I found all the jingling I was hearing in there were nickels and dimes and pennies and there would be a few one dollar bills in there, too. In times as tough as they were then, the so-called "numbers" flourished in Aliquippa, and this upstanding deacon of the church, Mr. Phelps, was apparently heading a numbers group and people would pick their numbers up and play them on these little strips of paper and if they had that number that came that day, they get $25.00 for a penny. For a penny, you would get $25.00. So I said to myself, "For a nickel, if I saved enough money I could pay." Mr. Phelps wouldn’t have to pay somebody who had a nickel on a number. I said, “I could even pay what they had a dime on,” the number, “if I saved enough.” So I started saving and one day my mother said to me, "Neal, I have found some money under the corner of the rug in the living room. Do you know where all that money came from?" I just walked away. [laughter] “I don’t know anything about that money under the rug.” [laughter] She took the money out from under the rug and I never saw it again, never heard from it again, and I stopped collecting. [laughter]

FP: Who took care of you and your brothers and sisters while you were growing up?

WB: Oh, my mother. My mother died when she was twenty-eight years old and after that my father, and this I will say for him, any number of people came and there’s at least six people who said, "I’ll take Neal, I’ll take Alfred, I’ll take Annie, I’ll take (Lessie?), I’ll take Margie." He said, "Nobody is going to take my children and indeed they're not gonna be put up for adoption or welfare." He said, "These are my children and if I eat bread, drink water, they will eat bread and drink water, but my children are gonna stay with me," and that’s what happened. He had two wives, subsequently, and then he married a woman that I had praised to him. … I gave up the numbers job and I developed myself a paper route. They had the *Pittsburg Courier* and the *Chicago Defender*, both black publications. I developed a route where I sold those newspapers and would make a little, but there was one woman on that route that I liked and one Sunday morning I found out that she came to the same church that I went to. So I said to my father, “There’s somebody I want you to meet.” So he went over and he met her and a short time later he married her and when she passed, he married another. … I was away in school when he married his third wife. … I don’t know what else to say. … As I said, I enjoyed my growing up because I loved school, always did love school and was fortunate. I like to be number one, I like to be recognized. … There were six of us wanting to be teachers. That was the biggest thing around us, the teachers, that an education would provide. Mario (Anardi?), Anna (Butz?), and her cousin Mary Barr and Bernie Wilkoff and Lehman. Lehman eventually became the principal of the high school. It was group of about six of us who were always in competition and when we

got [to] about the ninth or tenth grade, you could hear the whispers that people were talking about the National Honor Society and who was going to be picked for the National Honor Society, and these six said to me, "If they don't pick you, if they pick two of us or three of us and don't pick you, we are not going." Well, their parents were in the audience and they couldn't do that. On the night of the ceremony, they hadn't picked me, they didn't call my name to go to the National Honor Society. … When … Mary Barr and Anna (Butz?) walked past me, I could see both of them, they were cousins, I could see both of them, there tears flowing down their cheeks. They went. When it came time to pick who was going to give the valedictory address for the graduating class, nobody ever called my name, but everybody said, "He has to be on the program," and I was put on the program. They gave me the prayer that cadets said at West Point. It was written; they had typed it out. I was to read this prayer. I took this to mean that a black could read a prayer from West Point, but he couldn't sit down and write something that he wanted to say. So I had that kind of discouragement, but as I said, other than that, I enjoyed school very much. If you'll notice on that questionnaire I sent back, most of the time I said of my sisters that they had some grade school, I think … They weren't interested in going to school. … My sister, Margie, went to Hampton because I had gone to Hampton. She went and she did well. She finished. My brother, Alfred, went to Howard University in Washington and he finished there and then went on to Howard University Law School and he's been a lawyer for the last twenty-five years. My father didn't know what to do, but they had just started the CC Camps [Civilian Conservation Corps] and he took me one day and we went downtown to an office over the police station and I knew that that was an office of one of the administrators of the town. My father talked and I could tell they were talking about what kind of a job they could get for me, what they could do. As a result of that conference, my father came out, he was smiling, and I didn't know what they cooked up, but I do know that I got there a few a days after that, that I had been picked to go into the CC Camp. I went to the CC Camp and, you know, that's the program where young men would go to work on the roads, or in the forests, and whatnot. When they sent me to the CC Camp, the educational adviser at the camp said to me, "I need somebody to help me. I need somebody in my office. I want you to come, not go out on the job, I want you to work with me." He was a graduate of Hampton Institute. I worked in his office. I went home to visit my family one time and it happened to be just the weekend that the Johnstown Flood occurred in Pennsylvania. So on the way back to the CC Camp, I took a route, my ticket was open, I went to the Johnstown Flood and when I got back I wrote a story of the flood and what I saw. They printed a little paper in the CC Camp and put it out. Two or three weeks later he said to me, "I want you to take a ride with me." He put me on a ferry and took me across the bay from Cape Henry, Virginia where the CC Camp was, to the peninsula where Hampton Institute was. He had just finished at Hampton Institute. He took me to the Dean of Men's office and he said to him, "Major Brown, I have a young man that works in my office. I'd like for you to talk to him and see him." He had left me … and he took me inside, he said to Major Brown, "This is the young man I was talking with you about. Is there anything we can do for him?" Major Brown, after some little talk finally said, "We have a program here called the Work-Year Program." He said, "You work all day. We give you a job here at the school, you work all day, and you take two classes at night and if you do well in those two classes, you get whatever you've earned to pay your tuition for next year." So I went to Hampton as a work-year student and by being a work-year student, it took me five years to finish four years of college and I got a BS from Hampton in 1941.

SI: Is there a story about your father leaving the CCC job?

WB: Oh, yes. One thing about going to the CCC's, they would pay you $30.00 a month and I would send $25.00 of that every month to my father. As time went on, I began to break it down differently because my sister, Margie, was by then in school and I sent some there and to my father. When I went to college, I got a letter, which is not a letter of glee, from my father. One rather [in] which [he] asked, "Suppose you go to Hampton and you can't make it in Hampton? We could use that $25.00 here." … I got over it all right and he got over it all right, but that was his concern, not that I was gonna miss getting a college education. His concern was he was gonna miss getting $25.00 a month.

SI: I want to go back for a moment. You mentioned that you wrote this story about the Johnstown Flood? Could you just tell us what you remember about that?

WB: Yes, oh, it was awful. It's like we talked about the earthquake [Dr. Brown is referring to the earthquake in the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004] now and these things that happened [were] bad. Most of the Johnstown thing was property damage. You could see it. The Pennsylvania Railroad makes what they called the horseshoe curve and Johnstown is here and the railroad goes here, just like that, and you could see … buildings that had been torn down and washed down the river, buildings on the bank that had been flooded so that they would not be any good anymore. It was just a desolate area. A lot of damage had been done with the big flood.

SI: Could you elaborate a little bit on what you did at Cape Henry at the CCC camp?

WB: Well, fortunately, I had the foresight when I was in high school, even though I took the academic course, which was college preparatory, I went to the principal and arranged to take a course in typing and I could type. At one point when I was in high school I could type sixty words a minute and I was selected, when I got to the CC Camp, to work in the office or in the educational adviser's office because I could type.

SI: What did the educational adviser's office do? What was their function?

WB: They showed movies once a week. There were military trucks available to the camp. They could requisition two trucks and take enrollees into town, whatever town they were near, and bring them back, and various things, to help the men who went to work on the roads or in the woods to help them pass the evenings and whatnot.

SI: Were most of the men in the CCC group young men or older men?

WB: They were not; they were all sorts of men. There was a minister who had come to the CC camp and they had twins, the most beautiful girls I've ever seen, and when I graduated from Hampton, the first job I got was as an English teacher in Huntington High School in Newport News and that's where Reverend Pearson was from, Newport News. … One of his daughters was in my English class. She came to me one day and said, "My father hears me talk about you and he says he was in the CC Camp," with you.

AM: What was your first job like? Did you enjoy it?

WB: I enjoyed it very much. I had been fortunate in having Professor Palmer, which is what everyone called the principal of the high school. In my last year, I went to work on the docks at Old Point Comfort, about three … miles from the school. You had one boat coming in and another boat going across the bay so you'd unload one boat and load another one and by that time it would be time to go to class. So I used to go three and four days a week to work on the docks at Old Point Comfort and I came into Professor Palmer's class one day having just come from the docks, dressed very casually. I thought he was keeping me because of the way I was dressed. I had on a sweater with an H on it. I had earned an H playing basketball and I had a Hampton H on my sweater. He said to me, "What are you gonna do next year?" I said, "I guess, I'm gonna do what everybody else is doing. I'm going to the army." He says, "Yes, but that's if they call you." That's what he said then. He said, "What are you gonna do if they don't call you?" I said, "I don't know." "How would you like to work in my school?" I said, "There's nothing I'd like better." That was unheard of then if you were black. At that time, if you finished Hampton, you had to go work in a rural school, or some out of the way place, and if you made it for a couple of years there, you would get into a city school, get into a better school. So I said, "There's nothing I'd like better." He said, "Well, what would it cost me to get you to come to work for me? What do you expect to make?" I said, "I'd work in that school that I see that you have, I'd want $120.00 a month." So he said, "Well, let me talk to my board and I'll talk to you again next week." So another week passed and time came to go to class, he said to me again, "Mr. Brown, would you wait? I'd like to talk with you after class." The net of that conversation was he'd gone to the board, the board has approved his request, and they had approved $120.00 a month. "You're hired." So I got my job, first job, that was in the middle of the term when I was supposed to graduate, that June, so I had a job already.

SI: Can we go back and ask a few questions about your college experience?

WB: Sure.

SI: The first year you were taking the two classes at night and working during the day. What was your job and how did that year go?

WB: They have a thing they called the school commissary. It's like a little country coffee store, really, because faculty members came there and bought their groceries, students came and bought things to take to their rooms, or whatnot. I worked during the day in the commissary and then I go to class at night. The second year, when I had only the money I had earned, plus the balance of my tuition to go on, the next year the person who ran the commissary, they have a person from outside the school manage the commissary, said to me, "All of the free periods you have … you can work in the commissary." They paid fifteen cents an hour. I looked in … I have a little box I keep, those were some memories; when I look in there and see those slips that had been given me, so many hours at fifteen cents an hour. [laughter]

SI: Is there some story about George Washington Carver?

WB: Oh, [laughter] I was walking, the commissary is here and the school gymnasium was here. I was going down to the gym one day and I saw what looked like a homeless man, dressed in old clothes, and dungarees, and walking along, picking out plants and looking at them. I didn't know that he probably knew what they were. He had a little bunch in one hand. So that afternoon we were all summoned to Ogden Hall. There was gonna be a speaker and they wanted all the students to be there. … The same person I'd seen walking up the walk, and wondered who this was, came out on the stage dressed just like he'd been dressed that morning and when they introduced him, they introduced Dr. George Washington Carver. He was one of the premier scientists at Tuskegee, which is a sister school. or daughter school, to Hampton, and he had come to Hampton for the day and we heard, really, an inspiring speech, from Dr. George Washington Carver. … Somebody said to me, "Do you know who that was?" I said, "I didn't know George Washington Carver from anybody. I didn't know the guy that got all the stuff out of the peanut."

SI: When you started at Hampton, did you already have an idea of what you wanted to do for your major and your career?

WB: Not really. I took English because I thought I was pretty good in English and I took history because I liked history. That was my major when I went to Hampton, English and history, as a work-year student.

SI: Did you find it difficult to make the jump from high school to college in terms of academics? Was it a challenging course load?

WB: I never found school challenging, really. I said, "I know when they wonder, when they see this questionnaire I'm filling out, and my father had some elementary school, my mother had some elementary school, all my sisters had some elementary school and then I come up and graduate from high school and then get a PhD." I just took school as if I were walking, just took it in stride, and, as I say, I like to be at the top. I like to be at the top.

SI: You mentioned that you won a letter playing basketball.

WB: Yes.

SI: Were you involved in other activities?

WB: I played football, too. Football and basketball, but the only letter I got was from basketball. [laughter]

SI: Which position did you play?

WB: I played guard on the basketball team and halfback on the football team; didn't play very much football.

SI: Did that allow you to travel to play other teams?

WB: Yes, with both teams I was able to go. The most traveling I did was with the debating team. I … [have] a medal that I won at Hampton debating. Every year they had a series of debates that they called the Adam's Prize Debate and they gave real gold medals. I earned four at Hampton and they're very nicely made and on the medal it says, "The Adam's Prize Debate at Hampton Institute."

SI: Do you remember some of the topics that you debated?

WB: Oh, yeah, I remember them all. But it's hard to remember the ones that [I] debated in school because there's a national forum or something that comes out with … The big one that I remember that we had the most debates on was pump priming, whether the Federal Government should try to get things started in local communities by priming the pump, putting money in.

SI: I am just curious, which side did you come down on? Did you think the government should prime the pump?

WB: I think I did, but I'd like to take this opportunity to say one thing. If you are a speaker, you know, … if I had a choice, I would pick the side that most people in the general public would not pick and when I presented an argument that was sound enough for them to shift positions, you know it, you feel it, you see it, "They're on my side now."

SI: Were Franklin Delano Roosevelt's policies a topic for debate?

WB: Not really.

SI: What did you think of FDR and his policies?

WB: I had a chance to meet him, incidentally, on a parade ground and he saluted me. He said, "You're a fine young man." About two weeks later he died. I liked his policies. He started the CCCs. I liked it. I liked FDR.

AM: How did you feel about Eleanor Roosevelt? She was a strong supporter of race relations. Did she have an impact on you at all?

WB: Yes, she did. She visited Hampton while I was there and she visited the black air force when I was there. I liked her very much. She was a very influential person and she used her influence. She walked up to a black pilot, who was sitting in his plane, and asked him, "Do you fly this plane?" He said, "Yes." She said, "I would like to take a ride." … She got in that plane and went up with him and, with that incident, they started moving the black pilots overseas. They had men that they were paying to train, but they weren't sending them overseas, and white flyers were getting shot down. White flyers who were sent said, "Once they sent … black airmen of the 99th or the 332nd to fly with their planes, no more planes were shot down."

AM: While you were in Hampton, were you aware of what was going on in Europe previous to the breakout of the war with Hitler and his movement across Europe?

WB: With Hitler and the movement? I'm not sure I understand.

AM: I wanted to ask if you were aware of what was going on before Pearl Harbor? Did you have an awareness of the situation in Europe?

SI: Did you follow the news of the war and Hitler's conquest of Europe?

WB: No.

FP: So when you learned of Pearl Harbor, what was your reaction?

WB: Oh, I went right out and volunteered. I went right out and volunteered. I couldn't believe that war was that close, that I might be in the war. On a Sunday afternoon, I was correcting some English papers and I happened to need a break and I turned the radio on and I heard that Pearl Harbor had occurred. …

SI: You mentioned earlier, before you got your job, that you thought you might go into the army because of the draft.

WB: Yeah, I thought that [was] the only place to go. Everybody was going to the army and families were being concerned if they had young men of draft age that they were going to the army. So everybody in our group who was going to the army and … They would not draft you if you were in school with a reasonable possibility of finishing in time to still have some time for the war …

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SI: Please continue.

WB: I just couldn't believe that Japan would have the temerity to attack the United States. I couldn't believe it.

FP: What was your father's reaction to your decision to volunteer?

WB: I never got a reaction from him. He never said anything and I never said anything. I was away; I had gone right from Hampton to Newport News. Newport News is six miles away. Huntington High School was in Newport News. I went right there, found myself a little apartment and started to get ready and when school started, the football season started. I was assistant football coach and I was the English teacher. So that's what I went to do. It was money. I could still send my brothers and sisters money. I was making a salary, a regular check. I didn't want to go home and work in the mill. I went right to the job I got.

SI: Newport News is still a large naval base, correct?

WB: It's a shipyard.

SI: Before Pearl Harbor, the Navy was building up. Were you able to see the impact on the town with the increased shipyard building and activity?

WB: Yes, you could see that. In fact, after Pearl Harbor, I went to talk to Mr. Palmer, who was the principal, and he was well-liked in that town and in Hampton. Everybody knew Palmer. He said, "Do you want a job in the shipyard?" I said, "I sure would like to have a job." I said, "They're making good money and they're working." He said, "Let me see what I can do." Within three days, he had gotten me a job as a helper … in the shipyard. I went three days to work and then I came out and saw that sign with the guy with the red, white and blue hat and his finger pointing at you saying, "Uncle Sam needs you!" I went right to the office next door and I went to volunteer.

AM: Why did you choose the Army Air Force?

WB: I don't know. It was not the same as a number of people who were going in at that time. There were a number of black schools like Hampton and Tuskegee, who had started already. They had flying clubs in a number of cities, Chicago, West Virginia State, Memphis State. A lot of places had started flying programs and it was something that was in the air.

SI: When you were at Hampton did you have any kind of ROTC or civilian pilot training program to go through?

WB: No, I didn't, but they had a program at Hampton. In fact, when I got to Tuskegee, a number of instructors there were from Hampton, or one of the schools that had flying programs. No, I didn't. I was playing football and basketball.

SI: Soon after Pearl Harbor, I have read that there was a lot of panic, particularly on the East Coast with blackouts. Do you remember any of that? Was there any kind of panic that an attack might be coming to your city?

WB: No.

SI: Do you remember if you had to be careful about not letting light out because it would silhouette the ships?

WB: No.

SI: Do you remember any way that the war affected the home front before you went in the service?

WB: Before I volunteered, the war was just out there. … I was happy when Truman gave the Executive Order that the troops would be integrated, but I didn't see any effects of the war on us. The mill was going about its own business … at my hometown. It was not doing more because of the war. In fact, they were trying to sell the steel mill.

FP: Did you feel prepared when you enlisted to be in battle?

WB: No, I felt sure I was gonna be very disappointed that day because you would be looking for somebody who would kill somebody or who had almost got killed. Neither of those things happened to me. I was in the continental USA all of the years that I was in service. Unfortunately, I had no part in taking down Hitler, in taking down Germany. I had to do work with the men that were left here. Because of what I had done as a civilian, very soon they told me that I was going to be a special services, an information education officer, and they sent me to OCS [Officer Candidate School], officer training school in Miami Beach. They sent me to Washington and Lee, which was a school for special services and training officers, and I was to work with soldiers when they did not have to drill … I was to provide recreation and I looked in my chart when I was coming out it said, "He taught English, he was an assistant football coach" and whatnot. Those were the things I was seen fit to do and they sent me to three schools for that.

SI: Was Officers' Candidate School training in Miami Beach your first training in the Air Force?

WB: First training. When I went to Miami Beach, we went to Miami Beach by plane, and then a train from some town to Miami Beach. A truck picked us up at the train station to take us to Miami Beach. I jumped out of the truck as soon as we reached our destination and something hit me on the shoulder, somebody was poking me on the shoulder. "Brace, Mister." So I upped to attention, braced, and then a voice that I recognized said, "What are you doing down here Mister?" I said, "I'm going to Air Force Officers Training School," and then I recognized that the voice was the voice of, that said, "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn." So I turned around and looked and sure enough it was Clark …, it was Clark Gable right behind me and we saw a … documentary about Miami Beach and Clark Gable was leading the parade.

SI: What did you think of your training in Miami? Was it difficult?

WB: It was difficult. … After that day, that I met Clark Gable, they sent us out to an abandoned golf course, that's where we would drill in the afternoon, and you can see how black I am. If you can [see] me about four, five, six shades blacker, that's the way I would be when I'd stand out in that sun in Miami Beach for four hours and they gave us those (Frank Buck?) hats, which you had to wear, and where the hat went around your forehead, you could see the difference between this color and this color… About four days after we had been taken to the golf course, four days with drills, they said to us, "You can take the day off and you can go swimming. You could go down the beach, if you want to, or you can go in the pool." I lived at 18th and Carlin's, which is right next door to the hotel where the movie *Moon Over Miami* was shot, and the swimming pool that they were talking about was the swimming pool behind this hotel. So I went out there and some guys had gone to the beach, some had gone around to the pool, so I went up on the board and I swung the diving board up and up and then I took what we called an old river dive. I just jumped in the water and swam the length of the pool. By the time I got from one end to the other end, the pool was empty. I was the only black there and the pool was empty. Then I got up on the diving board again and a guy from Georgia came up to me. I didn't know until later that he was from Georgia. He said to me, "You're going back?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I'm going with you." He swam back down with me. Finally the one, two at a time, the other

fellows, who had gone out of the pool, came back in the pool, but that was quite an experience. I was out there in that water all by myself swimming and I knew that most of the guys there didn't want me in the water where they were going to swim. I was used to that though, because in Aliquippa, there were two swimming pools, one here for blacks, one here for whites; housing patterns were the same.

[TAPE PAUSED]

WB: On the way to Washington and Lee, I got off the train, which the station was about three blocks from the hotel. When I got near the hotel, two white soldiers were walking and I could hear them, one asked the other, "You going to salute?" And the one that was asked said, "Yeah, I'm not going to salute," and when they started to pass me, I stopped them. I saluted them and they returned the salute. I said, "You don't salute me, whenever you see this, this means this is an officer, that's what you salute," and I was a second lieutenant then. I said, "You salute these gold bars. You don't salute a man of any color. You salute … his rank." Well, I was sent next to McDill Field in Tampa, Florida. I went in and saluted that major and said, "Lieutenant William Neal Brown reporting as ordered," and he said to me, he didn't salute, I saluted him. He didn't salute. He made no form of recognition. He said, "There must be some mistake." He said, "We don't have any nigger officers down here." Those were his exact words and he picked up the telephone, while I was standing there, and dialed a number, I assumed it was in Washington. "In three days" … he said, "that one we got yesterday." They'd gotten a chaplain, who was black, and he was in the bachelor officers' quarters. That's where the major sent me. There were two of us there then and the next day the chaplain said to me, "Let's go out and see what the town looks like." So we went out and we found the bus system. There was a man standing at the front door that takes your money if you go in the front. There was another one riding so that he could man the backdoor and if you were black you went in the backdoor and that was very aggravating. We didn't ride the bus long. We got off the bus and went into a drugstore and we asked for a Coca Cola and Coca Cola used to give these old glasses that's small at the bottom and then they get bigger. We asked for Coca Cola he gave us a Coca Cola, the chaplain one and me one. We drank the Coca Cola and set the glass back up there. He pointed, he came around, took the glasses and smashed them in the sink. The chaplain said to me, "I think I'll have another one." I said, "I think I will, too." We had another Coca Cola. The guy came back and took his two glasses and smashed them in the sink. We just about filled that sink up with glasses before we left.

SI: Did you have difficulty going on in the face of all this bias from a morale standpoint?

WB: Not really, because the telephone call the major had made, with me standing there, paid off. There must be some mistake; somebody else thought there was some mistake. I was sent back to the base that I came from, just outside Detroit, and I assumed the chaplain was sent back where he'd come from. Oh, that getting to McDill Field was something. … The people outside seemed to have noticed more than the people inside the army. When I went in to the Atlanta Station to get a train ticket to Tampa, he said, "Oh, you're a first lieutenant." He said, "You're eligible for first class service." The army had paid for first class service. I knew what it was, I was eligible for first class service. So he gave me a car that had, the way cars did then, sleeping, went into the car that I'd been assigned to [a] seat in a car where there was a very attractive

young white girl. … She was very friendly and I was looking pretty neat myself in my uniform, wings up there, and so we started talking. When it came time to go to bed, the Pullman porter pulled the bunks down and made the beds and the girl said, "I'll take the bottom one, if you don't mind." So I climbed into the top one. Meanwhile, while we had been talking, there were three Tampa white men, who had been going back and forth from their seats to the men's room, and we assumed that they were going go the men's room and taking a little swig of something because they were acting more and more loud, boisterous, and talking this, that, and the other thing, going up and down the aisle. When I got in my bed … I noticed something hard under my pillow. So I put my hand under my pillow and it was a pistol. Later on, when those men had gone back to their seats, the Pullman porter came over to me, "If you found something under your pillow, you don't know how it got there, and I don't how it got there, and I don't know what it is." It was a pistol. He put a pistol under my pillow, and I'm sure the Pullman porter did and these guys kept going up and down the hall making wisecracks and stopping right by where we were going to sleep, instead of going on by. When they got here, they had stopped and made some conversation, then they went on. Yup, I ran into a lot of that.

SI: Just to back up a little bit, were you commissioned after you finished OCS at Miami Beach?

WB: Yeah.

SI: Then you were in the special services for a while.

WB: I was, for all the time I was there, I was a special services officer. They sent me to two other schools, to Washington and Lee, and to a school for special services.

FP: Were you the only black officer in Miami?

WB: In Miami, I was the only black officer and, I imagine, there were two platoons of officers there, I was the only black one in all the classes I had. I came to the conclusion that whatever you did in civilian life, that's how they decided what they wanted you to do. You have to remember that a lot of these fellows already belong to … flying clubs in their cities or in their schools and they knew there were jobs that had to be filled they had to put people in because they wanted something to happen, … but I didn't belong to a flying club or to anyone of the schools that had them.

SI: What were some of the duties that you performed when you were at Washington and Lee and the other places?

WB: Oh, the worst one was at Washington and Lee. The other two officers who were there with me, there were three of us at Washington and Lee, they were all black. To show you how Washington and Lee was, when I got there I was the first one to get there, so I went into the dormitory that was named and went to a room that was, the number was on there, and there was a young black boy, fourteen or fifteen years old, sweeping the floor of that room. I threw my duffle bag on a bed and he stopped doing what he was doing and said, "Lieutenant, you gonna sleep there?" I said, "Unless they change my room before it's time to go to bed, that's where I'm gonna sleep as I'm the first one here." I put my stuff on that bed because that's the bed I picked.

He said, "Lord, old General Lee gonna get up in his saddle and travel at night and he's gonna ride right out of that gate." I said, "Is General Lee here?" He went to a window, he said, "He's buried right there at the head of the parade ground. General Lee's grave is right there. He's gonna get up and ride off tonight. He won't be here." [laughter] …

SI: When did you get to Tuskegee?

WB: I got to Tuskegee, I volunteered on March 31, 1942 and, I guess, it took them three days to get me to Langley Field. You had to go to the nearest air base if you're volunteering for this program. You have to go to an airfield, so I went to Langley Field in Virginia to volunteer. There were twenty-six people there that morning to volunteer, to go in. Three passed, two black and one white and there were a lot of blacks and whites in that line. It was just about even, but there were twenty-six in line, and so I'm given them two days to get me to Tuskegee.

AM: What did you know about Tuskegee before you arrived?

WB: I didn't know anything, really, about Tuskegee, except that I went to Hampton and the graduate of Hampton started Tuskegee, so I imagined it was very much like Hampton, but I don't know anything about it.

SI: What did your training at Tuskegee consist of?

WB: The schools that they sent me to, they didn't train me. … There was a lot of confusion about the schools because some, I always said, they already had what they wanted to teach in the schools and also because, I think, they had trouble getting instructors to teach what they wanted to teach so that classes were being shuffled; people taken out of one class and put in another class and instructors were being shuffled. … It's like you try to put something together in a hurry; it takes time. So there's some confusion …

SI: Approximately how long were you at Tuskegee?

WB: I was at Tuskegee, I guess, about six months and then we went to the field just outside of Detroit. What is …

SI: Selfridge?

WB: It sounds like it, Selfridge Field, and it's from that field that I went to McDill Field and encountered that business on the train.

SI: After you were sent back from McDill, were you sent back to Selfridge in Michigan?

WB: Yes, I was.

SI: At Selfridge you were the special services officer.

WB: That's right, special services officer, they combined, it's always Information and Education and Special Services. The special services part is like recreation. The information and education is like education. You're supposed to help people who want to know where they could go to get this or that, or very often, what they wanted to know was something about the units that you're training in. They hear rumors and you're supposed to be able to clarify any rumors that might be around, and to do that, people who were of higher rank, if there is something being contemplated or planned, notify the information education officer who helps the troops.

SI: At Selfridge you joined the 477th Bomb Group? Was that before you went to McDill or after?

WB: That was after. I think, they were still trying to decide what to do with me when I went to McDill. That was very early.

SI: Who was the commander of the bomb group when you joined?

WB: The commander of everything was B.O. Davis, General B.O. Davis. His father was the first black general in the army and was still in the army but he was infantry and B.O. Davis came to Tuskegee and got his wings and became the commander of the black air force.

AM: Did you ever have any personal interaction with General Davis?

WB: Not really, no.

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about some of the rumors that you said you had to deal with?

WB: Well, I can tell you about one very much. One thing that was always at issue was the officers club and there would be rumors that black officers were not welcome in the officers clubs. … There were one or two instances of arguments or disagreement that had come about because this was violated and one of the rumors that caused quite a big stink because a lot of, not far from Tuskegee there was a camp called Camp Atterbury. While it was far enough, it was in Indiana I believe, but the rumor was that there was a camp there where all officers were welcome, black or white, and the black officers got together a group and they went to Camp Atterbury to test it.

SI: You said that General Davis was in charge when you joined the unit. Was this after they had replaced all the white officers?

WB: Oh, no, oh.

SI: Was there a Colonel Selway?

WB: There was a Colonel Selway when I got there, but B.O. Davis did replace him.

SI: How long were you there before B.O. Davis came?

WB: As far as I can remember, about a month.

SI: So you were there when there was the protest at the Freeman Field Officers Club? Did you hear about that?

WB: I knew about it.

AM: You were not at Freeman Field; your squadron was never at Freeman Field.

WB: No.

SI: Even though it happened at another base, did you feel the effects of the protest?

WB: Not really. There was just a general feeling of unrest and not being settled in, because it was new and they were developing and there was so much competitiveness, among even the white officers that were at Tuskegee, because white officers were being replaced by black officers. White officers were being promoted, some promoted and some not being promoted. Black officers being promoted, which interfered with some blacks and with some whites. It was a kind of, the situation was bubbling, yes.

SI: Did morale improve when Davis took over?

WB: No. … Davis worked through the enlisted men. He had a cadre of nice, solid men who were made staff sergeants, sergeants and worked in the office and they kept things going and kept him informed of what needed to be attended to. I didn't notice anything when he came. The only thing about Davis he immediately jumped into flying and the rumor was that he didn't learn to fly and he was still the head of a unit that was flying and they'd say, "Get out of the way here comes B.O. Davis." [laughter]

SI: Did you ever go up in the planes?

WB: Several times.

AM: Did you receive flight training?

WB: No. No, I was on that side, the one thing they always tried to get you to remember is that there are some bold pilots and there are some old pilots, but there are no old bold pilots, and they said B.O. Davis was an old pilot, who was not bold. [laughter]

SI: Was part of your job to inform the men about the news of what was happening in the war overseas?

WB: No, no. My job was to make intramural competitions between squadrons for basketball or Ping-Pong or whatnot, yes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Before the tape started, you mentioned you had met Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis.

WB: Oh, yeah. Another part of my job was if anyone of note or of celebrity [status], because they were a good actor or good athlete, was known to be in the neighborhood, a part of my job was to try to get them to come and see the soldiers, so that … I don't know if that was all of your questions.

SI: Did you have any personal interaction with either of two gentlemen?

WB: Oh, yes, and Joe Louis I liked very much. One guy who used to clean my office every morning had been assigned to do it, at Jefferson Barracks they gave me a little building off to the side, which was the Special Services Office and every morning the person who came to clean it was William Warfield and he was singing while he was cleaning the office. … Two things that he sang in *Ol' Man River* and *Showboat* we did and the one about the injured fellow, who had to use wheels for his legs. He sang on Broadway in that [*Porgy and Bess*]. William Warfield, when he left the army, he went to Memphis State to teach music and then his brother told me he fell and broke his neck last year and he died last year.

AM: Did you meet those celebrities through the USO [United Service Organization]?

WB: I'd go where they were playing and identify myself and usually I'd be let in without any … charge and I'd tell the person who's running the theater or was running the club, I wanted to see if I could get this group to come and perform for the base. … The groups were usually very nice.

AM: Was there anyone else that you met? You mentioned Duke Ellington.

WB: Duke Ellington, I met him several times, Mercer Ellington was in the 619th, that was Duke Ellington's son.

SI: You mentioned earlier you were able to meet President Roosevelt a few weeks before he passed away.

WB: About three weeks before he did pass away, maybe a month, we got a message one day that on his [way] back to Washington from Warm Springs, Georgia, where Roosevelt went very often because of his polio and they said the water in the springs in Georgia helped him and he would go there, but on the way back to Washington he was coming by the fort, Leonard Wood, and review the troops. … He did come by and so they sought me out and said they were gonna put the 618th and 619th last in the line of march, that we should pass in review, and when we passed the president's car, we salute. So we did. We lined up and it was cold, it must have been October or near October, it might even have been September when we got this call, and we paraded all week that week, paraded and paraded. … Then the time came and he had a long car, it was like a convertible, a long touring car that he could sit in the back and the driver and someone else would sit in front. … There were, I don't know how many platoons lined up, he just come around and where we stopped and I was busy watching what they were doing and somebody said, "Brown, the colonel is calling you." So I looked up and the colonel shouted,

"He's calling you." So I looked at the car and it was the President of the United States. I ran to his car and saluted and he returned my salute. He said to me, I was a fine young man. He didn't know me from Adam, he said I was "a fine young man." … I saw the President of the United States and earlier I had met and talked with Eleanor. So I saw him there and he moved on and about three days after that he died, but he did review the troops.

SI: Did he look ill when you saw him?

WB: He didn't look ill, in fact, one of his biographers says that he had a way being or looking ill and then popping right back. You couldn't tell whether he was really ill. He said that Roosevelt was always having a little stroke; he had called, "I had a little stroke." He didn't look ill. He looked just like you see him on the front pages of the *New York Times*.

FP: What was your reaction when Roosevelt passed away and Truman had to take over?

WB: I think, like most of the country, people always said that Truman was just a little old Kansas [Missouri] haberdasher and he wasn't ready to be president, but he wasn't in there very long before he wrote an executive order saying that there had to be a break up of the way army was set up, that there would not be, no more black and white. … As President of the United States, I think it's a part of the Constitution and the orders that the Congress gives me, that there would be no more separation in the army, Executive Order 9981.

SI: Did you and the other men in your unit think that you were going to go overseas soon before the war ended?

WB: No, I don't think so. I [didn't] have anyway of knowing that. … I never asked anybody, but I don't think anybody would have told me anyway. … That the general way of the army, is there was competition between the groups in who was going to do what.

----------END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE----------

WB: [Eleanor Roosevelt] … asked to go out with one of the pilots. She probably knew there's going to be some foot-dragging about sending them overseas and that they were ready. She came down to the lines and volunteered. "I would like to go up with one of the pilots," and she did go up. It wasn't long after that that the first group, the 99th … was supposed to be first going overseas to accompany our bombers, but the 332nd was the one that went. They gave them, I don't know if you saw that HBO [Home Box Office] thing on the black air force, and in that the flyers, who had to fly with the bombers, said, "Since the blacks had been accompanying us, we haven't lost a plane."

SI: Were the men that you served with in the States aware of that record?

WB: No … no, I don't think they were aware of that.

SI: You were not keeping up on the news of what was happening to those men in Europe.

WB: No.

SI: Can you tell us what an average day was like for you when you were at these bases and you were serving as the intelligence, education and special services officer?

WB: Well, I go to the office and usually in the morning I would have interviews. You'd be surprised how many men were in the army who thought that they were entertainers of some kind. Some had entertained before they came there, with some success, especially those who came from New York, and they come because another part of my job was to put together shows, and if there were volunteers who felt that they had something to offer, and said so, you're supposed to use them. So I would talk to them, listen to them, and just like any other job, there's a time, and you can say what the time would be within in certain hours, there's the time that you would go for lunch and then you go back to your office again. It was like going to work.

SI: It was a nine-to-five job.

WB: Right.

SI: Were the men who auditioned for you mostly pilots?

WB: These were the base men. (Honey Cobbes?) and this one that I mentioned, who was that, in *Porgy and Bess*?

SI: William Warfield?

WB: Yes, William Warfield.

SI: What do you remember about some of the shows that you put on?

WB: I think that they would be good enough, some of them, that you wouldn't just get up and walk out, because there were some guys who said they could sing and they could sing. There was one fellow, (Honey Cobbes?), who said he danced at the club in New York …. in Harlem.

AM: The Apollo?

WB: The Apollo, yes. He said, "I danced a dozen times at the Apollo." … It turned out he could dance and … he was on a couple of shows for me and there was one fellow who said he could sing.

SI: Did you do any work with the USO?

WB: Not really. I tell you what I did do. There were ladies groups in a number of towns who would form groups to help the soldiers. Libraries, pictures, if you took pictures and you took 'em in, they would display them and have meetings and serve some kind of refreshments or whatnot. You could do that very easily.

SI: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the bombs being dropped on V-J Day at the end of the war? How did you react to that?

WB: No, I don't remember where I was then. I had a pretty pleasant life and my two medals. They have it on that sheet there [Dr. Brown is referring to the pre-interview survey]. "Did you get any awards?" Got two medals for service in the continental United States and something else.

SI: The World War II Victory Medal. Were you shocked that the war ended so quickly? Were you expecting a longer war?

WB: No, I really wasn't. Who was the guy who was the tank commander? They did a movie about him.

SI: Patton?

WB: When Patton was going to there, I said, "We're on our way now." Those tanks were doing very well.

SI: You stayed in the military for at least half a year after the war ended. Is that correct?

WB: I don't think so.

SI: Can you tell us how you got out of the air force?

WB: Yes, I know how I got out. There was a fellow who, what was Fred's last name? He wrote a book, *Black Man in the White House* [E. Frederic Morrow]. He was an adjutant or an attendant for Eisenhower. They were very close and he came and told me, "I know a social agency that's looking for a boy's worker," he said, "and I have checked the records, and there is a ruling that the war is over and anybody who is essential to the national health and welfare of any given community, if he has five people to speak for him, can get out of the army." And he set the thing in motion and he went to Jersey and the mayor of the town, the executives of the agency, the senator and somebody else wrote letters to the army saying that the town of Englewood, New Jersey desperately needed, had scrapes with the law, he needed a boy's worker. … These five letters came in, then they discharged me for the safety and welfare of the community.

AM: Had you been interested in social work before then?

WB: Not really. I got a degree in social work after that.

FP: Did you decide to take advantage of the GI Bill?

WB: I did.

FP: Why did you decide to use it?

WB: What?

SI: How did you use the GI Bill?

WB: Well, I went to Columbia and they paid for all of my work at Columbia. They did not pay for all of the work for my doctorate and, I think, they assumed that I had used all of the GI Bill, but I didn't use it all. … All of the work at Columbia and all of the work that I got my degree as a social worker was paid for by the GI Bill, and I bought a home in Montclair and resided there for fifty years with the help of the GI Bill.

AM: Were you working in Englewood while you were studying at Columbia?

WB: Oh, yes.

SI: When did you graduate from Columbia?

WB: 1950.

SI: You also went to City College, City University?

WB: There is a graduate department at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. I went there. At Columbia, I wanted to go on for a doctorate, but they will not allow you to go into the doctorate without at least three years of practice and I was in a hurry.

AM: What did you think of New York?

WB: Oh, I liked New York and I liked Columbia because it was just a very good school.

AM: Was it much different than your life at Hampton? Were there a lot of differences between city life at Columbia and your life at Hampton?

WB: No, because I didn't live in the city. I'd get on the bus and go to Columbia and go to class and if I didn't have to go to the New York Library to do something, I'd be going back to Englewood, which is just across the river.

SI: What was the focus of your studies? Were you working on a thesis and what was that about?

WB: I was working on much the same kind of things as when I was in the army. I had to engage a group of little middle school boys in something that would be interesting enough for them that they would come to the agency and not get in trouble.

SI: What did you wind up doing?

WB: Oh, I can remember fishing trips. There was a [work] shop in the agency basement and we used to talk with them until they decided something they wanted to make and I would try to help them make it.

SI: Was this similar to what the Boys and Girls Clubs would do?

WB: That's right.

SI: Were you able to apply things that you had learned in the military to your civilian life?

WB: Not really, I'd done them before the military. I think I applied them both to the military and to civilian life.

SI: Can you tell us how you came to be employed at Rutgers?

WB: When I got out and went to Columbia, while I was going to Columbia, I got an overture from the Veterans Administration in Newark to come and work there as a social worker. I took the job and then the boss called and asked me, "Would you like to be a supervisor here or would you like to be in charge of all the students that come here?" They had students from Columbia and another school of social work. There were three schools that they asked [if] I'd like the job working with students. So I did that for about three years and then the director said to me, again, he said, "Would you like to continue working with students the way you are or would you like to supervise students, which means you would determine whether they pass or fail in the agency?" So I said, "I'd like to." I said, "What does that mean?" He said, "You have to go out and talk to the agencies about how they're doing, and what they're doing, and whatnot, and you have to come to decision." So I said, "I'd like to work with the students as supervisor," and I supervised a lot of students. I had to go to Rutgers to meet with the people who supervised the students I was working with and I went to a couple of meetings and I enjoyed it and someone who worked at Rutgers said, "I hear that these people talk when you're not here. I believe they're gonna offer you a job." I said, "Well, no, they're not gonna offer me a job." Sure enough, I got a little note one day; this is just an inquiry. "We are looking for a person to be an assistant professor in the graduate school of social work. Your name has come to our attention and we'd like for you to come to talk." … I went in, for what turned out to be a number of meetings. Worked out all right; they offered me the job. I was the first black person Rutgers hired as a Professor. … I enjoyed working at Rutgers. Forty-one years is a long time. [laughter]

SI: A very long career. What was the focus of your teaching and what were some of the classes that you taught?

WB: Well, the major class that I taught, and the one that got me most of the teaching jobs, that I had outside of Rutgers, was the one about human growth and development, where I combined the work of Freud and Ericsson and Brown into what makes a child, who has to grow to be a stronger child, and a better parent. When a friend of mine got an offer to go overseas and teach, he had been at Columbia with me, he gave my name to the president. The president asked me to come out there, but that's what I taught out there.

SI: At Wisconsin?

WB: Yes. I guess, I'll start with the one that … I forget all the time, that was at Hebrew University in Israel. … Second, I'd put the one that I put first, … the "university on a hill." I called it "university on the hill." I could sit right in my office when I was at Wisconsin and see that lake. The university sits right on a lake and up on top of a hill. I would put the University of Wisconsin and the University of Pittsburgh, because it's just eighteen miles from Aliquippa and I get to see my family very often when I'm doing something at the University of Pittsburgh. I loved Cornell, not only because of its reputation, but it's a beautiful school in a beautiful town. That brook that they have that runs right through the center of town and down to the river and you can go and on your lunch hour get down in that mood and just walk down and walk under the trees, really nice.

SI: The rest of your family stayed in Aliquippa or around that area.

WB: Or Pittsburgh or in that area; Aliquippa or Pittsburgh. I have one sister who lives in Philadelphia.

SI: There's one thing that we skipped over. Going back to World War II, you mentioned in your little write-up that you had a pretty terrifying flight from Tuskegee to Detroit.

WB: Oh, brother, that was it. I think … that and the three-week bivouac. I was put in charge of the group when I was at Washington and Lee. We had to go on a three-week bivouac in a place where there was no anticipation of anybody shooting you, but you had to use a pup tent and you had to put together the things that you would want to do in the evening and during the day and whatnot; you're in charge. So we had to do a bivouac for three weeks. That was a difficult one. While we were at, I don't know why I keep forgetting their name, while we were still all, three of the groups were still at, just outside of Detroit, Selfridge Field, we were sent down to Tuskegee. Eight people were picked and we were to go down to deliver something, (Chapey James?), who was the pilot. So we went down during the day and he called us all together before we [were] gonna eat a sandwich or something for supper. He said, "I have a problem." He said, "My wings are icing and we don't have time now to get them de-iced." He said, "I'd give you a choice. Would you like to go back to Selfridge tonight, or, they can give us accommodation to stay overnight here and we can go back in the morning? If we go back tonight, we've got to hedgehop from here to Selfridge." He said, "You'll be able to see people walking on streets, you'd be able to see the top of telephone poles and, obviously, it's more dangerous just above the hedges than way up in the air." Everybody, a lot of the men, had families that were at Selfridge with them. Some of them had just gotten married. They wanted to go back to Selfrigde. So he said, "We'll go back to Selfridge," and he took that big, he had a big 477, he put it up in the air, just above the telephone poles, and that's the way he went from Tuskegee to Selfridge. … He flew the plane that night so much so that when we landed at Selfridge I saw men actually get off the plane and kiss the ground. [laughter] It was quite an experience. We had put [a] box in the plane when we left Selfridge and the men were gonna start a poker game to pass the time while they were flying to Selfridge Field. Coming back home they did the same thing. They put that box down, got a deck of cards and they were playing cards while we were going back to Selfridge Field. But that was something, because if you ever got up and looked out the window, it seems that you were sitting right on the ground. [laughter]

SI: Do you remember if there were any accidents at any of the bases where you were?

WB: Oh, yes, there was one terrible one. I mentioned, when I mentioned the schools who had flying, West Virginia State was one, there was one little short fellow in the group, who came and said he was gonna solo before anybody. "They taught me to fly at West Virginia State." He said, "I'm going to do this because I want to make it better." He said, "I can fly, I can solo now," and he said this all the while, and the way the field is laid out at Tuskegee, when you're getting ready to land, there's a pattern. Let's say you take off this way and you go this way around and then you go up higher and higher and when you're ready to come in you come down and you repeat that pattern. That's what they called it; you got to fly the pattern if you want to land. … You go around here and over here there's a river that runs this way, and they cautioned guys, who were learning to fly, before they solo, "You got to remember to allow enough … time that when you start your descent you get over that river." Well, I can't remember his name, but I have it written in my book so I don't forget it, he didn't make the river. He soloed first of the all the guys that was there, he was the first one to have to solo. He brought the plane in and he started in here and the guys were saying, "Does he have enough height to get over that river and get down to land?" … Instead of heading over the river, he went in the river, killed him, yes. I met one guy there, who is still a very good friend, after he came out he became the borough president of New York … Percy Sutton, that's right. I always forget that name. [laughter]

SI: Did you keep in contact with a lot of the people that you served with?

WB: Not really, because they have a meeting every year, but the ones who have been going tells me it gets to be pretty expensive and I haven't been able. I haven't wanted to take that expense. They meet in some city, some place every year and … they called it the Black Flyers Convention, and I haven't gone yet.

SI: To go back to your career, you mentioned over lunch that you were involved in a number of debates. Could you tell us about some of them, particularly the one with Malcolm X?

WB: Oh, Malcolm X took and was trying to spread around the view that the blacks … I guess, because of the way they had been treated and were being treated, should ask the government to give them a parcel of land where they could make the laws, base the taxes, and whatnot, and they would have their own little place … to live. … He was spreading this. He went to the President's alma mater, Yale. He went to Harvard, he went to Dartmouth, he went everywhere. … I knew this was gonna be the point of view he was going to take and I took the position that blacks would do much better if they, well, Bill Cosby maintained the same thing, now, if they invested more in their own preparation, their own education … Well, Malcolm always sets off the debates. … There was someone else who Malcolm had challenged, to debate, who came from the [Rutgers] Law School. Nixon apparently had planned to appoint him to something and two weeks before the debate, he calls me and said, "I've been asked not to do this." … He said, "And I think the person who is asking me can have a bearing in my future." He was appointed to a Superior Court, and he said, "The students say that you're the person that should be debating him." … I, at first, was reluctant. But I liked to debate and … not only that, I figured that with the times that I had had to prepare a debate, there are certain steps that you have to take, you

have to know, “What could he say to try to make his point good and you have to tear those down?” Well, so I said, "I’ll take him on." I took him on and, I think, I did take him on.

AM: Where was the debate?

FP: How long did the debate last?

WB: … It was at the Rutgers School of Pharmacy. How long it lasted? We have it on tape. You know, it lasted two-and-half hours, to listen to that tape; you get tired of listening to that tape. …

SI: Who sponsored the debate?

WB: The students and the Newark unit of the NAACP [had] asked for debate and the debate was gonna be between Malcolm X and this professor from the law school. Nixon asked the professor not to debate Malcolm X, “Not in his best interest.” So he asked me. I collected some stuff and the stuff I’ve collected I’ll give you. I agreed to take his place. After the debate, Malcolm said to me, “That was nice. Let’s do it again in the Polo Grounds.” [laughter]

SI: Is that what Malcolm X said to you?

WB: Yes, he didn’t say the thirty thousand people, but I know the Polo Grounds does hold thirty thousand people. …

SI: How involved were you in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s?

WB: Not very much.

SI: Did you go on any marches?

WB: Yes, I did.

AM: Being on campus for so many years, you must have seen action on campus among the students.

WB: Oh, I’ve seen action and I knew some students who came from out of the country who were at Rutgers.

SI: Would you just like to read this for the record and explain what that is?

WB: Oh, … nine days after the debate Malcolm sent me this postcard. That’s what that is.

AM: Would you like to read it?

WB: Oh …

[TAPE PAUSED]

AM: Do you want me to read it?

WB: Yes.

AM: The postcard reads: "It's better to live in a shack that you own, than to live in someone else's mansion." Signed, "Malcolm X."

WB: He was getting ready to debate someone from the University of Arizona when he sent that, nine days after my debate.

SI: Was it from Phoenix?

AM: It is from Phoenix, but I cannot read the postmark here.

SI: November 9, 1961.

WB: Yes.

AM: What did you think of Malcolm X? Did you get to interact with him before or after the debate?

WB: I think he's not only an unusual, but a very bright guy. I liked him very much. He didn't have the benefit of education. He had no education beyond what he got on the streets of New York, but he has parlayed it. He used what he learned, wherever he learned it.

SI: Were you at Rutgers when they had the building taken over in the 1960s or were you at other colleges? There were many student protests in the 1960s.

WB: I must have been. We've had some things that I didn't like at Rutgers while I was there, but I don't know about the take-over of buildings and …

SI: Where students took over a building.

WB: Yes. Oh, that's for tomorrow, now, there's somebody coming wanting to do this tomorrow.

SI: What was your most vivid memory of World War II?

WB: I think having somebody wake me up and tell me that the Japanese had dropped bombs on American ships. It was unbelievable to me and then I didn't have very good memories. I have vivid memories of our dropping those bombs in Japan and what those bombs did to people and they haven't forgotten.

FP: Do you keep in touch with any of your comrades?

WB: Not really, that's because I really wasn't involved. That's why I told you at the beginning I thought you might be disappointed … I did what they asked me to do, but I didn't have to kill anybody and nobody came close to killing me. Probably the most dangerous thing that I did was that three weeks of bivouac. The other two guys were from infantry outfits that do that all the time and I, when I was asked to be leader and to be in charge, and I didn't know what was gonna happen out there in the dark for three weeks.

SI: Had you had much experience in the outdoors before?

WB: No, no, and it was a good distance from where Washington and Lee is.

SI: Is there anything we forgot to ask about your career at Rutgers? You mentioned the classes that you taught and your guest lectureships. Were you involved in any committees at Rutgers or any part of the administration?

WB: No. [I] did have an administration meeting once in a while, I go to that and, occasionally, you'd have a vote, but the administration was the administration. I didn't have to get involved in that.

AM: You mentioned your relationship with Mason Gross earlier. Do you want to elaborate on that for us?

WB: Well, he called me over and I went over and we had a conference. He put forward the glad hand of welcome from Rutgers and … he said to me, "If you ever need anything, if you have any trouble finding housing, let me know." I never had to ask him about housing. I had bought a house on the GI Bill. I commuted to Rutgers to work everyday, so I don't know, he was just an easy person to talk to and may have been easier for him than for me. He remembered me and that was nice. I just had a good feeling.

SI: Overall, in your teaching career, what did you try to impart to your students about social work?

WB: I think that what I tried to impart, not only in my teaching, but in my life, is from a verse in *Thanatopsis* [by William Cullen Bryant]. "So live, that when thy summons come to join the innumerable caravan that went to sway to the silent halls of death, thou go not like a quarry-slave at night, scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust. Approach thy grave as one who lies down to pleasant dreams."

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Well, thank you very much for having us here today and thank you both for your hospitality. This concludes our interview with Dr. William Neal Brown on February 25, 2005 in Millburn, New Jersey. Just for the record Dr. Brown did not read that quote from *Thanatopsis*, he quoted it from memory. [laughter]

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Allison Mueller 4/19/05
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 4/22/05
Reviewed by William Neal Brown 5/10/05