

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL E. ROBINSON

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SANDRA STEWART HOLYOAK

METUCHEN, NEW JERSEY

JUNE 13, 2008

TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: This begins an oral history with Daniel Edward Robinson on June 13, 2008, in Metuchen, New Jersey, with ...

Richard F. Plechner: ... Richard F. Plechner.

SH: And Mary Lou Strahlendorff, and Sandra Stewart Holyoak. To begin, Mr. Robinson, please tell me where and when you were born.

DR: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 30, 1925.

SH: Let us begin by talking about your father and his background, and then, we will branch out to your mother.

DR: My father is Daniel W. Robinson, whose father is Daniel W. Robinson. So, he's ... the second, I'm the third, and, later, you will find a fourth.

SH: Great.

DR: My father's father came from the eastern coast of North Carolina. He is the son of a Daniel Robinson, Scottish, white. His mother was one of the servants to that family. Now, that is in Pee Dee, North Carolina. The records are in the county office and can be verified, and has been so. My father and his father came to a town in Concord, North Carolina. My father met a lady, Stella Lawing, whose father also was Scottish, white, whose mother was a servant for the Cannons. She was Violet Cannon, named for the people who she was a servant to. The Cannons are a famous family for textiles, Cannon Mills [Corporation in Kannapolis, North Carolina]. That is where she came from. My grandmother, for my mother's father, was a slave who came from Africa. She lived to about, over a hundred, maybe 110. I have the record. She was the midwife in the community, delivered most of the babies, at least ten to my mother alone. I think, I'm not sure, but she passed away in the 1940s or so. (Mr. Robinson's grandmother, who practiced midwifery into her eleventh decade, was Grandma Emily.) My grandfather, ... I am talking about her son, my grandfather, passed away in 1939. Now, his father, who was Scottish, gave him a large parcel of land, which is a small town called Silver Hill, in Concord, that land, and the family still lives there. It's a small town, with streets and houses and things that he owned and rented, and property that he farmed with people who lived in the community. The grandfather ... who is the father of my father had a similar situation, and he had a large parcel of property in this area. That property now has the Charlotte 500 [Racetrack] built on it, and he passed away on the steps of the Wachovia Bank while making a deposit, back in [the] 1920s. I don't remember the exact date. I would have to look, but those two grandfathers, both my father's father and my mother's father, were one-half white, Scottish, and the other was Afro, direct African or Afro-American, parentage.

SH: Obviously, they were acknowledged by their fathers.

DR: Oh, yes. It's in the records, and, at that time, the Scottish people on the east coast of North Carolina ... did not hold slaves. Slaves were mostly [in the] central South, mostly Irish, some indentured people who had gotten their freedom and all. They had slaves, more, ... you know,

statistically, but there may be incidents where this doesn't hold, but the records in North Carolina reflect this, even in published records.

SH: Though they were given land, were they also given an education?

DR: Well, my grandfather, ... he must have, because my grandmother gave me his algebra book, with, "1871," or something, in it. ... When you're the oldest boy in the South, you're "Bubba." So, my nickname, of course, was Bubba and my grandmother, somehow, thought that the relationship between me and that grandfather was a little unique, and she would give me things that she thought I would appreciate. So, she would give me his books and things like that, and I'm very proud of that book. To have an algebra book, with his signature in it, from that early date, it's; you can't imagine what it means.

SH: It is priceless.

DR: Right, and we also [have], in that town, the merchants produced a book with the credit rating of the people who could get credit, and they gave "A"s, "AA"s and "AAA"s, and, after the name, it would have "COL" if it wasn't white. I have that book, from 1917. That book shows that my grandfather has a "AAA" rating and [was] a merchant. He owned a store that the people shopped in, etc. The other one was a farmer, a high rating. My father's in there and his brothers are in that book, which is another book that I cherish. It showed that the relationship in the State of North Carolina absolutely was not the same as in South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama. Since that time, the state has published a history showing this relationship was uniquely different in the State of North Carolina.

SH: Was your maternal or paternal grandfather the merchant in the town?

DR: My mother's father.

SH: Your mother's father.

DR: My maternal grandfather. His name is E. W. Lawing, L-A-W-I-N-G. ... They can trace who his father was because the father gave him the town, and he gave his own sons similar [inheritances]. They lived in the town and there are incidents [where] I've seen him with his brothers from the other side of town and, sometimes, they look alike. [laughter] Now, these are the truth, and I'd like to comment that when the truth is exciting, there is no necessity to lie.

SH: That is true. That is very true.

DR: Yes, and all of these things are true.

SH: Do you know what crops your paternal grandfather grew?

DR: Cotton.

SH: Cotton, okay.

DR: "King cotton," cotton. They raised cotton, but, of course, they had foodstuffs for [themselves] and silage material for the animals and things, but, primarily, it was cotton, yes. Well, that area, the Cannon Mills and things, [other] cotton mills involved, that part of Cabarras County, in North Carolina, was defined by that.

SH: I wondered if that was the case.

DR: Yes, the Cannons. ...

SH: Before we began taping, we talked about the importance of education in your family, and you just mentioned that you have the algebra book from one of your grandfathers.

DR: Yes.

SH: It was obvious that they were being educated, most likely, in segregated schools.

DR: Absolutely. As a matter-of-fact, I attended segregated schools. My mother went to the Livingstone College and my father went to the Hobson Agricultural College. The agricultural college was in North Carolina and South Carolina, [at different times]. There were some issues and the school was burned and they moved it and rebuilt it. That history is documented.

SH: When your father attended, he was going to school in South Carolina and it was rebuilt in North Carolina.

DR: I think it was the other way around.

SH: The reverse, okay.

DR: Yes, but I'm not positive about it, but I met some people, in my lifetime, who knew it, who even knew my father, who went to school with him, and they gave me that part of it. My father left the school before that happened.

SH: Okay.

DR: ... I was told that that school burned down and they rebuilt it. It was Hobson Agricultural School, that's where he went, and my mother went to Livingstone College and she only went for one year.

SH: Where was Livingstone College?

DR: It's in Salisbury, North Carolina. It's an AMEZ [African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church] supported school, yes.

SH: Did your parents talk at all about their upbringing?

DR: ... Everything we learned was ... mostly from my grandmother. My mother was busy being the mother and raising the family and all, but my grandfather would take me on the wagon, when he'd take the people to the field and drive along, and, I don't know, he sort of liked me.

SH: I am sure.

DR: And one of the defining things was, I did something, I think, that he was pleased with and he gave me a nickel. That was a lot of money, and he said, "If you'll let me borrow your nickel, I'll give you a penny more at the end of this week." So, at the end of the week, he gave me six cents. So, I wanted to know if he wanted to borrow it again, and he told me I had understood what it was about, [laughter] about interest, yes.

SH: Did he take you up on that? [laughter]

DR: I don't remember too well, but my mother told me what it meant, because that's how he came about [in business], how he converted ... the land which he had into money. He built the houses, he sold them, and she explained to me, "That's what it means. You borrow the money and you make some money and you give the person part of it, interest on the money." That's before I started school. So, that's the kind of way I learned, and my grandmother, ... she was like the conscience of everything and she would have me read to her, which was [from] the Bible, and I'm thinking, "She can't see too well," and then, I realized, when I left and looked over, she's reading. Then, I understood; she really wanted me to read it, you understand? and even the newspaper. I remember distinctly, back in the '30s, especially when the war was going on over in Europe, [the] Italians were in Africa and they showed the pictures, the guys with spears and the guys with rifles. [Editor's Note: Mr. Robinson is referring to the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy in 1935 and subsequent occupation.] She made me read, not made me, but asked me to read it for her, "Read this. Come here, Bubba, read me this," and I would do it. Then, I realized she wanted me to read that because, perhaps, I would only read the comics or the sports, and I was a little fellow ... and I did. So, that was the grandmother I had. So, you can imagine how rich a life that is, for somebody to care [so much], and that went for every grandchild she had, and, boy, did she have a lot. She had nineteen children; I don't know how many survived. My mother had fourteen; eleven survived. ...

SH: Was this your father's mother?

DR: This is my mother's mother. We moved into the town, or my father came to the town, that my mother's father owned, literally, that little hamlet. Hamlet is a better word.

SH: Okay.

DR: And so, everything, then, the influence, came from that family. My father's father's family were, like, schoolteachers and things. They were really educated. They all finished ... college and everything. His sister taught [in] the school, his mother taught school, and they were in the tobacco region of North Carolina.

SH: Okay.

DR: All right? So, that was no question. You never finished school at least until you finished the high school. ... They wouldn't even let you go to work or anything. ...

SH: Really?

DR: Oh, it was, absolutely, and, for us, ... you went to college when you finished. It was just plain. It didn't matter who ... made the money [that sent you to college]. Your uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, neighbors, everybody would help you go to college. That's the way it was. I don't know how it got that way, but that's how it was, plain and simple. I think, out of all those children, I don't think any of my brothers and sisters didn't finish college.

SH: That is amazing.

DR: And my wife's family, every one of them. It was part of it, and it was so natural that you didn't imagine it was different [than the norm], and that was the truth. So, ... the goals were there from the beginning, and they were no less or more difficult to obtain than other goals set by other people at lower standards. So, this is really what my experience was there.

SH: Did your father ever say what brought him to the hamlet?

DR: His father moved there and had farmland. They had farmland. They had brothers in South Carolina that owned so much property that, when the war came, the government had to come to get them to sign off on [the] property that these people had [and] they didn't even use. [Editor's Note: During the World Wars, the US Armed Forces developed maneuver areas and training camps by acquiring land from private owners.]

SH: Which war are we talking about?

DR: These are the ones from the eastern part [of North Carolina], the Robinsons, that they had all that land in [North Carolina]. ...

SH: World War I or World War II?

DR: World War II. World War I, both my ... my father and his brother were in World War I.

SH: Did he talk about his experiences with you?

DR: Well, he was in the Medical Corps, which was unique in itself. He was in France and everything, and he picked up some French and he taught us that, of course, [laughter] and things like that, but he didn't talk much about the war, but you know one end of it; if he's there as a medic, in the Medical Corps, and being black, he's probably [doing] more scrubbing and cleaning than actual medical things, but they have to take the same studies, [wore] the same uniforms and everything. ... I can't imagine what it would have been like, but he never talked about it. [The] only thing I remember [was], he brought back the gas mask, he brought back the ... thing you sleep in.

SH: The tent?

DR: No, it's a hammock.

SH: Hammock.

DR: That's what they had on the ship.

SH: Okay.

DR: They used them, and then, you get to keep it, and I remember the uniforms and all of that. He brought that back.

SH: You talked about having brothers and sisters.

DR: Yes.

SH: Where do you fit in chronologically?

DR: I'm the second from the top. I'm the oldest boy, which makes me, the nickname, "Bubba," and I'm there, at the top, and my mother had the notion that if I got through school, everyone else would [as well]. So, when I'm away, everybody [would] concentrate on my oldest sister to go to college. She went to Livingstone College, where my mother went, yes. ... You had to go to school. [laughter] If you had a choice of going to school or getting a job, most people went to school. [laughter]

SH: When you were in elementary school and in high school, did you have jobs after school or on weekends?

DR: When I was in the elementary school, and the third grade, it was, you had a potbellied stove to heat the school. Are you with me? There was no water, that we'd have to go some place and bring the water there. I've forgotten [when], I must have been nine years old, or whatever. I got the job to come and make the fire to heat the school before everybody got there, at that age, but, before I went there, I'd make the fires at my home, so that my sister could cook, for my father, breakfast, because he [went] to work. Now, that's that. ... All my life and everything, I had jobs, ... [would] shine shoes in the barbershop, had my own shoeshine box. Any menial task of that nature, I did it, and it turned out that I obviously did it with the idea that I really wanted to, that I wasn't caused to do it against my will, and so, I did it well. ... You got promoted and somebody else [would] say, "Can I have this guy to work for me?" ba-boom, ba-boom, and it was that way even in the high school. I was fortunate. The high school was in the city. I lived in the country. I could walk there, but a bus would take you, or I'd have a bicycle. So, after school, I would go to work, and I was very young and I'd work at roadhouses. You'd take the food out to the cars and things like that, and I was quick and fast and would rhyme the menus and things. ... People would blow the horn and they would tell [the staff] they wanted me to come, because I was entertaining them. I did that, and the [interesting] part is, [laughter] you

say, "Well, when did you study?" [laughter] The book, at the end of the sessions, was as new as it was when they gave [it] to me. It was a gift.

SH: [laughter] I guess so.

DR: I'm serious. In the math [class], the class is on page twelve, I'm on twenty-four. When they get to twenty-four, I'm on forty-eight. I'm finished and they're still taking them, [the exams]. I am not required to take the exam and the teacher sends a note, when he's not there, that I should teach such-and-such. ... It's true. ...

SH: Was it a one-room school? How was the school set up?

DR: All right. In the grade school, it's three [rooms]. We have first and second, third and fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh, in one room, two rooms, three rooms. In those classes and everything, I had to literally teach myself. I had a problem. ... My memory wasn't very good, because, if I didn't know what something meant, I couldn't remember it. So, we'd do the multiplications and I'd do them slowly, and then, when I'd get them right, ... the teacher thinks I'm doing it slowly because I'm cheating. ... I'm not cheating, but she thinks so. So, she tells my mother, "He's slick. He's smart, clever. We don't know how he's doing it, but he's cheating," and I told them, "I'm not cheating," and my grandfather tells them, "No, he's not cheating. He doesn't have to cheat." I'm saying, "Why are they saying this?" Well, it turned out that I thought if you have nine and an "X" and another nine, it means, "To this number, add this number to itself this many times." ... There's no "thing" [conception] of multiplication. Multiplication is really adding. A computer can't multiply, it has to add, and that's what I did. I didn't know everybody didn't do that. So, once, she gave me something to do [that proved] that I couldn't have cheated, because she'd never asked it before and I was able to do it, and I'm thinking everybody did it that way. I couldn't remember things like that. So, I had problems with [the] ABCs, because they didn't mean anything. [laughter] I'm serious.

SH: I believe this.

DR: And the only way I could get by is to remember the ones that everybody else didn't remember. So, when everybody's hand is down, mine is up. So, I [could] get through [the] ABCs. I only know XYZ, I don't know ABC, [laughter] if you understand what I'm saying to you. Then, later, I learned that this thing has a sound. That's what it is. It's not just a thing, it has a sound, and then, ... I realized what it was and I [was] able to go on by myself. So, most of my life, I've taught myself.

SH: I see that.

DR: Even ... at the university, same thing. At the university, the Mayor of New York [from 1990 to 1993], David Dinkins, was a classmate of mine. He was a math major and he had to take the highest math, and I'm taking the same highest math. I'm an engineering student, I'm not required [to take it], and he says, [laughter] "Why are you taking it?" I said, "Because I understand it."



[TAPE PAUSED]

DR: Okay, where was I?

SH: You were talking about taking college courses with David Dinkins.

DR: Yes, right. So, he realized that that was unique, but I didn't realize [it]. [laughter] I [would] think he was doing it like me, but he was remembering, he was remembering. ... If I understood it, I could never forget it, but, if I didn't understand, you could give me a test, I could not pass it, but, there, the teachers hardly ever required me to take the tests. They would tell me, "We need the room to separate [spread out]," and send me away, even in the graduate school, same kind of thing. If I understood it, fine; if I didn't, I just plain didn't. So, ... I never could depend on memory. So, this thing has contributed to all the success that I've had, ... but I had no notion of it. This is it. People knew it and I didn't know it, because I didn't know that wasn't how [other] people, you, thought. As an example, if you don't think that way, you can see that I'm thinking differently, but I don't think it. Do you follow what I'm saying?

SH: I do, I do.

DR: ... I learned from that, that I pay a lot of attention to what people perceive in me, and even if they perceive something bad, I entertain that equally, because perhaps there's some reason, and, if it is, I will alter that. Do you understand? but I learned that I could not have been successful unless somebody realized that I had this kind of a mind. I started to say "problem," but, really, it was [not a problem]. I didn't have to study to pass in the high school. So, I could go to work at night, come home at eleven o'clock, and go to school [the next day] and sit in the room in the study period, bang.

SH: Were any of your other siblings gifted in this way?

DR: This daughter that's ... in Stanford; she went to Stanford to study sleep. [laughter] ... As a matter-of-fact, she finished Rutgers.

SH: She has got it, too. That is wonderful.

DR: ... So, the whole thing is not just [due to] me; their mama, definitely! [laughter]

SH: Let us go back and talk more about of your growing up in North Carolina. How important was the church?

DR: Well, I can't remember not going to church. I remember going to church when I was crawling in the pews, practically, with my mother. I remember going to the Sunday school class and my uncle was teaching it and I remember telling them some things he told me. I told them I didn't believe him. I didn't; I did not believe in children [who died before being baptized] in a fiery furnace and all that, didn't believe it, and then, the other kids were thinking that I'm going to hell for that. ... My uncle told them, "He doesn't have to believe it. He doesn't have to believe if he doesn't want to, but, if it's true, it is true, and, if it is and he decides it is, then, it will be, but he

doesn't have to believe it." Now, that's how I was taught, because I was stupid enough, as you might say, to tell them that I didn't believe that. [laughter] You understand?

SH: I understand.

DR: Now, ... I knew ... about sin. I had thought that ... the greatest sin was to murder, and my grandmother told me, "No, Bubba, that's not the greatest sin." [laughter] "What is the greatest sin?" She says, "Hate." I'd say, "How is that?" She'd say, "Well, Bubba, if you don't hate, you don't murder, you don't steal, you don't do any of those things when you don't hate." That was easy. [laughter] Now, I don't have to remember anything but not to hate. Did you get it?

SH: I got it.

DR: That's what my grandmother taught me. ... Those are the things that defined me. My mother was busy, cooking and cleaning and ironing and washing and raising children and diapering them.

SH: She had eleven. That is a lot.

DR: Right, you understand, and I guess you would realize, being the oldest boy, I learned to cook, clean, wash, iron and diaper, [laughter] and, for sure, it was not an unpleasant thing for me.

SH: Were there any activities, other than the church, that you were involved in, besides your chores?

DR: Oh, yes. In the Scouts, in Boy Scouts, I became a Life Scout, [the second-highest rank in the Boy Scouts of America], very active in [the] community and in school. I'll tell you something. My mother taught me math and my mother taught me how to tap dance. My father taught me how to draw. So, in the schools and things, when they'd have the contests, art, I would get [win] the money. When they'd have the amateur show, I would get the money. [laughter] This is fact and, with the math, I didn't have to worry about my GPA. [laughter] So, when the teachers [were absent], generally, they'd have to get a substitute, but, for the sciences and things, they would ask me to teach the class, in the class that I had already taken and in the ones that I was taking. ... When I graduated from the school, all the teachers got together and got a scholarship to Johnson C. Smith University, four years, for me to go, and the principal got a one-year scholarship [for me] from Syracuse University to study art. That's what those people thought [of me]; that was their perception [of me]. Well, you don't abuse that. You would never not do right by those people, would you now? but that's the truth and that's how it went.

SH: Were there Ku Klux Klan activities in your area?

DR: None to my knowledge. I understand there was a group there some time later, but there was ... one incident. My grandfather, finally, later, let the property, one of his farms. He had white sharecroppers and the fellows had some children. They were young adults, or what have you, and one of my uncles, somehow, the "her" [a female family member of the white sharecroppers] was in a position; I don't think it had gone to an extreme, but just any thought of

such a relationship was taboo. ... He [his uncle] was found to be, you know, in a position that he should not have been and there was a lot of clamor. My mother was so upset. She [thought] they're going to lynch her brother and she believed that, and my grandfather goes to the fellow and he talks and all and they make a deal. ... I think, somehow, he's not going to make him pay for the seeds and my brother, uncle--I keep using the word "brother" because that was his nickname, because he was the oldest boy--would have to leave the town for awhile. ... That's the worst thing that I knew [of], but there were never any of those kind of things at all in the whole state, that I remember. Maybe there was one that happened once, and I saw a newspaper account of it, I still have it, but North Carolina was uniquely different than the South. That is a fact and you can verify that just from the state records. As a matter-of-fact, I have a book published by the state which extolled what virtue there was in the race relations, when even separate and equal was literally "separate but equal." The pay was the same, the books [in the schools] were the same, everything was the same, and, when integration came, I went home and [went] to visit my mother-in-law's school, and there's three or four black kids, all the rest of them [white]. It's just like that, and the rest of the country was still fighting over integrating, just like that. They were ready. If you had the master's [degree], you got the same salary, you had the bachelor's [degree], same salary, white and black. Now, that was unique, and I think the influence that was on the East Coast [was], those people were more like New Englanders on the East Coast of North Carolina, and still are, as a matter-of-fact. You know, [with] the water and all of the things and the way they are, it's still there. That's why those Outer Banks and things are so popular today. That was unique. It was unique.

SH: You had talked earlier about reading to your grandmother about the events that were taking place in Europe.

DR: Yes.

SH: What year did you graduate from high school?

DR: 1943.

SH: 1943. You knew that the United States was at war then.

DR: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Boy, I remember December the 7th. It was a Sunday. I was working at the place, like I told you, where you go over to the cars. People were going crazy. I think I made 125 dollars in tips, people just throwing away money. That was more money than my father made in two weeks, [laughter] just went crazy. ... You would never forget that.

SH: What did you think that meant for you, December 7th?

DR: I didn't have any real idea that it would last so long, but I understood it absolutely, because, in 1939, in what was going on there, ... the people who would come to the barbershop [would discuss it while I] would shine their shoes, you know. Everybody who [could] afford to get his shoes shined and get his hair cut and a shave had money. As a matter-of-fact, one guy owned the building, [laughter] and they would talk about these things and they would talk about what was going on, even Spain and Germany and the relationship then, the Italians going there, [Mr.

Robinson is referring to the Spanish Civil War], and knowing full well there would be no time before we [would] be in there. I remember, a hundred percent, Czechoslovakia, "What was going on?" and everything, [Mr. Robinson is referring to the Munich Agreement that granted Nazi Germany territory in Czechoslovakia], and I'm listening. They probably thought I didn't even know or care, but I knew what was going on. When you understand something, you can't not know it. It was something I understood. It wasn't something from memory.

SH: In 1940, when the draft was instituted, did that also include blacks?

DR: Oh, yes. ... They came to the high school to do it and I remember my father coming to sign up and everything. Oh, that's one thing, [laughter] that it was always equal when it comes to getting shot. Even in World War I, it was the same. They drafted my father. [laughter] I'm sorry.

SH: [laughter] That was very good, well put.

DR: You know, let me tell you something, I'd learned, early on, that profound thoughts are like medicines that are really good for you. You need them, but, sometimes, those medicines are bitter, so, they coat them. So, if you have a profound thought and you tell it and you articulate it with humor, people swallow it and they get the same effect. So, if I make you laugh, excuse me, [laughter] but I guarantee you ...

SH: That was very true. That is true.

DR: Isn't it true? Yes.

SH: Were any of your cousins part of the early draft that took place before December 7th?

DR: Nobody was called up before December 7th, of my relatives. I don't know if any were old enough to have been.

SH: Before we start talking about World War II, I would like to talk about the Depression and how that affected your family, and your extended family in that area of North Carolina?

DR: Well, in this area, ... having a grandfather that was literally, you know, theoretically rich, when nobody has anything, ... at least, he's writing down how much you owe him, because ... you're not going to starve. He's going to give you the cans of salmon and the dip of the lard and the pull of rice and stuff, because that's how it came. Lard came in barrels, tubs, rice came in tubs, beans came in tubs, cheese came in big cakes, with a cutter, and he had that [store]. I don't know how much money that poor man gave my family, [laughter] but he was the kind of fellow who believed that if he has a daughter who marries a person, that person is the same as his son. If he has a son that marries a girl, that girl is the same to him as his own daughter. That was his [belief] and I found nothing but perfection in my grandfather, [laughter] you understand? So, I adopted that, and another thing, my father used to tell me, "You're supposed to respect all people, regardless." I said, "How about the lady over there that has this reputation?" He says, "She's a person, right?" said, "Well, you respect her," and he says, "Especially if she's a lady." I got that,

you understand? That's how I was taught and brought up, and it was easy, because it seemed so real. It was so correct. You couldn't find any fault with it and that was me. I didn't have to think about how to behave now. If it's a lady, I behave. If it's a Jewish person, I behave. If it's black or if it's white, it was no different, and we were taught that and we believed it, and still do, of course.

SH: How did the Depression affect the mills?

DR: Bad, but the mills, the people [owners], I don't know if every place would have been like North Carolina, but whatever work they had, they divided the amount by the number of people they had. So, everybody worked practically all the time, [so] that he got his portion. It might be one day a week or two days a week or three days a week, but each person got some work, that [there] wasn't [widespread] laying off and one person worked full-time. I don't know how, why or what caused it, but you know those people in the South are Baptists, believing in religion and stuff, and they just can't help themselves. [laughter] They're scared not to do right. So, that was how it was. My father would be off two or three days a week. ... You worked, like, forty-five hours, forty-eight hours, [which] was a week. So, [if] you divide that up, you might get two or three days, and that's [the] cash you would get. Now, as far as, "What do you need?" well, the home, you don't have to pay anything. You don't pay the taxes. If you don't pay the taxes, you just don't get to vote. [laughter] Nobody really was that concerned during the Depression. So, we raised all kinds of vegetables, tomatoes, onions, cabbage, corn, (balm?), rotate the crop. We dug sweet potatoes up in the fall. We raised pigs. My father butchered them. He smoked the ham. We didn't get to eat the ham. He sold it to the restaurant in the hotel. His were prized, because he had gone to this agricultural school and he knew all about that. He really knew animal husbandry. I mean, he was very good. He knew his subject and he could teach, you see, but he got more money for working in the mill than the teachers got. That's why he didn't teach, and it stayed that way. He never did teach, because ... even as things got better and better, of course, he was promoted and he had, like, a foreman's job in the mill, [laughter] which is more than the teachers would make. So, he never did go there, but, during the Depression, we, all the kids, he had, first, one girl, and then, seven boys in a row, ... six of us living there, so, all these boys [were] doing the farming, doing the vegetables. We would rotate the crops. ... Sweet potatoes, we would [dig up] in the fall. We would take our wagon, go through the neighborhood, knock on the doors. The maid would come to the back, and then, we'd sell her the fresh fruit, fresh tomatoes, fresh cabbage. She'd tell you what to bring her and we did that and my father would give us half the money and he would take half. They were nickels and dimes and quarters, but we could go to the movies and do things and we were enterprising. He actually ordered a wagon from Sears-Roebuck, with the little sticks and things. It was a pretty thing. We'd shine it and clean it and everything, [laughter] and we made money. ... On the weekends, we'd go, on Sunday morning, Saturday and Sunday mornings, with the shoeshine box, go shine shoes for a nickel, you know, and, if you're good, the guys, ... everybody wore white socks and they weren't going to let you shine their shoes if you're going to get it on their socks. ... Bubba was the best, because he never got it on your ... socks. This was what my mother's telling me when I'm leaving, "Be careful. Don't get the polish on the man's sock." You understand? My father said, "Well, shine my shoes first. Let's see how you do." [laughter] ... He didn't pay me, of course, [laughter] but this is the truth I'm telling you, I'm not exaggerating. Much of this is coming back to me as I talk to you, but this is a fact, and the fact that my mother taught me to tap

dance is the truth, and I was good at it. [laughter] I mean, good; I'd never lost a contest, made money.

SH: Did your other brothers learn to tap as well?

DR: They couldn't tap as well, nobody [could]. At the theater, they had a theater; we couldn't, black people couldn't, go to the theater, true.

SH: Not at all?

DR: Not at all. At one time, I think, [when] they first built it and they let them go upstairs, somehow, somebody did something and they stopped it. Now, for the white kids, they had something called a (Popeye?) Club, and the kids would come to the theater, and then, they would have us tap dance and the kids would throw money up there. ... I'm tap dancing and they'd be trying to throw the money, but you can't get the money, and then, when they stop, these kids who couldn't even dance good were getting it, and that ... didn't seem right, and I'm hardly getting anything. ... They [could] even see where the quarters [would] go, and very few quarters came, but some kids' parents were the Cannons. So, I developed a step where I could keep dancing and pick up money at the same time. [laughter] This is the truth, lady, I swear it's the truth, you understand that?

SH: Got it.

DR: So, then, they said to me, [laughter] "We will pay you to come and dance. We'll give you a dollar and you just dance and let them have those coins." It's true, it's true. When the high school had the annual amateur hour, I'd get the first prize. ... I'll tell you, you will see, later on, when we get in the service and all and you see who people I knew there [were] and what I did, then, you'll see that I obviously could do it. [laughter]

SH: One thing you mentioned was that if you did not pay your taxes, you could not vote.

DR: Yes, they're called poll taxes, [laughter] as a matter-of-fact. You understand that? [Editor's Note: Poll taxes were used to disenfranchise African-American voters in the South until the passage of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment in 1964.]

SH: I do.

DR: Well, I know what it means, because it happened. [laughter]

SH: Was your family politically involved at all?

DR: Well, I can tell you, back during the Depression, I would say every black person was a Republican. They're still voting for Lincoln. It's fact, can't make it not so. It is a fact. My mother, my father and everybody voted for Lincoln, but we had some kind of a feeling about the flag and the person, the President, that you were in awe of the flag, you were in awe of the country. You were in awe of the President, he's the President; you don't curse, swear, say any

kind of words against him. He's the President of the United States and we felt that way, and I still do. You understand? but, when the Depression and the problems came and Mr. Roosevelt came, the black people decided they had to vote for the Republican, and then, they did and that's when the ...

SH: Democrats?

DR: I mean, not to vote for the Republicans but for the Democrats, and that's when the ... blacks became Democrats. Previous to that, all the whites were Democrats, because they were voting against Lincoln. You understand? I'm talking philosophy-wise, and, now, once this happened and the blacks are the Democrats, then, the South is in trouble. So, they formed, some called it Dixiecrats, if you remember. [Editor's Note: The States' Rights Democratic Party, or Dixiecrats, splintered off from the Democratic Party during the 1948 Presidential Campaign and supported a segregationist, conservative platform.] They couldn't be Republicans, it'd kill them, [laughter] but, now, ... that's gone. ... I've lived to see that washed away, but that's fact. That is how it was, and I remember when Mr. Roosevelt was elected. ... We couldn't afford the newspapers, so, I'd go through the rich neighborhood and, when they'd put out the garbage, I'd take the books, you know, and get down on my knees and read them. I was scared to bring them home, because my parents would get me for taking it off the garbage. ... I mean, the book's the book, but I remember getting on my knees, reading about the President and what he had to say and things of that nature. ... It's interesting, I don't remember when I learned to read, but it must have been, maybe, practically, almost before I went to school, but I remember, during the Depression, ... my father would buy the almanac, because that would tell you what to plant, when to plant and all that. They believed that. So, I'm reading and I read, "The sun is closer to the Earth in the winter than it is in the summer," and I went nuts, because I couldn't figure that out, and I just was going crazy. "It must be a mistake or something." So, I started to try and figure it out and find out why, and I found out why, and, now, I'm in school, in the class, and I know all this now and the teacher doesn't know it. ... You get the geography book, *Journeys in Distant Lands* [by Harlan H. Barrows], and all this stuff is in there, the Congo and the Equator and all that stuff in there, and here I am, I'm eating it up and I'm reading it like it's a comic book, [laughter] because I love it. Now, that's, I remember, in the third grade, just reading the book and couldn't wait. After I finished, I was upset and I went, got the next one, which is in fourth grade, to read it. So, with that and the math, stuff like that, I was teaching myself. I was just going, going, going, been that way [all along].

SH: Did you see evidence of the different programs that Roosevelt put into existence?

DR: Yes, I'd say. I remember ... the WPA [Works Progress Administration] was a real good one. ... The property that my grandfather had, that was given to him, is in the middle of a white thing [area], because it was white before. So, here we are, stuck in the middle; you couldn't go twenty feet beyond the line [and] you were in the white neighborhood. Up here are the riches and over there are factories, and it's called the Factory Hill. ... We were in the center of that, but I remember that they had the WPA. So, they're going to put sanitary plumbing in the white school and they had to dig through the yard of the black school, channel through there to put the pipe [in], but [they] didn't give us one. We still had outhouses, three rooms, wooden outhouses. They had a brick house and toilets and stuff and it came through our [yard]. ... This, I

remember, but the black guys were happy to be digging those ditches and making them, putting in the sewers and stuff, but it's true. [laughter] It was like, "While they're still [there], just dig another [sewer line]." They didn't do that, yes, but that, that I remember. That was really sticking out, yes. Then, they had certain foodstuffs that they gave to the poor people, ... to support the farmers, sort of. Now, I remember that and people going to get it. Of course, we didn't qualify to get it. [laughter] So, my grandfather told them, ... he called them and told them, "My grandkids are coming ... up there. Give them some stuff," ba-boom, ba-boom. Well, they had apples and oranges and stuff like that, and he said, "But, don't give them the clothes or stuff like that." So, we would go. ... They'd give us butter, cheese, stuff like that. We got it. ... We didn't really warrant it, but my grandfather couldn't support all his own kids, [laughter] at that time, you know, because it was draining him to do it. He had a ledger about this long on IOUs. [laughter]

SH: I am sure.

DR: ... But, it didn't bother him, but I guess he thought that we should get some of the food. So, we got that. That's the only part that I remember that we got, that we enjoyed doing, but it was really mostly for people who really were down-and-out, but I guess my grandfather figured he was making a contribution, too, because, ... if you came to buy a can of fish or salmon or whatever and you didn't have the money, he's going to give you the can. He's never going to send you [away from] there without it, and [he would] write down that you owe it. ... I don't think he ever expected to get it back, but that way, ... you know, he had some control over how much [was given out]. ... Then, that lady would take the can of salmon and ... she made [it] taste so good, (her hips?) were so big when she got through with it, but that was the Depression, that I don't think I suffered. I don't think there was anybody [that] was malnourished. We had just as much obesity. [laughter] ... Everybody was eating, eating, eating, and, many times, people would come and go in the morning and [we would] find somebody'd been digging potatoes. My father would make no note of that. ... He figured if they had to do it, they had to do it, you know, but, if he said, "Come get it," you know, greed would probably take over and one person would have all the potatoes. So, he didn't seem to mind, yes.

SH: After December 7th, did you see a lot of your high school classmates leaving to go into the military?

DR: It's interesting. I didn't notice, but I found out that ... they did. As a matter-of-fact, when I went into the Marine Corps, there was a fellow; the only reason I think I went is because the group I was with decided they wanted to go, and they wanted to go in the Marines because one of the guys, who had been a classmate of mine, had already gone there, before the high school [graduation]. So, that meant he'd dropped out of the high school and went. He might have turned an age as required, but I think, at that time, the law provided for you to go to school X number of years. So, I don't know what happened, whether he volunteered or what, but he was there and there were other cases, too, that I realized, but everybody wanted to go, from my school and all, into the Marine Corps, which was brand-new for the black [enlistees]. [Editor's Note: African-Americans were not recruited into the Marine Corps until May 1942.]

SH: That is what I wanted to ask you.



DR: They did not go in there before.

SH: How did that come to be and how were you made aware of that?

DR: Okay, just as I just told you. That's really how I knew, because there was a group of guys that I went down with, from my school. I knew them all.

SH: Where did you go down to?

DR: To Fort Bragg. ... The conscription caused us to have to go to a point to be indoctrinated or to enlist. ...

SH: You did not do anything locally, in your town, first.

DR: No, no. They'd send you a letter. ... They already have your name, already know your age, already know that you're in school, and, when the school is out, ... the draft board tells you when to go. ... So, they call us and we go down to Fort Bragg for induction. Now, down there, they do all the inspections, bah-bah-bang, bah-bah-bang, and then, ... the service can pick you or you can pick the service, and these fellows, already before they were going, and I was going with them, said they were going to go into the Marine Corps.

SH: Because of this other man.

DR: Yes, and I'm thinking I wanted to go in the Air Force. What do I know? So, we go and we're in [the induction station], this process is taking place, and I thought I'd said, "I want to go into the Marines." Well, the Marines, you have to volunteer to go in the Marines. I don't care; they cannot draft you into the Marines. So, I said, "I would like to go," and the guy was talking to me, "What do you want to be?" I said, "I want to be a pilot." He said, "You can't be a pilot." I said, "Why can't I be a pilot?" He said, "Well, pilots are officers." I said, "So?" He said, "We don't have black officers." [laughter] That was that, but I was already, you know, committed. So, I said, you know, "I'd like..." So, he asked me some questions about ... isosceles triangles, some things like that. So, obviously, I must have given the right answers. So, he said, "You're in." Now, all of those guys who were supposed to go, all but one of them was accepted into the military and all of them were accepted into the Marines. One of them didn't pass the physical. Then, when it's time to go back and all and get sworn in, the guy puts me in charge. It's true. [laughter]

SH: From Fort Bragg, you came back home.

DR: You go to Raleigh to get sworn into the Marine Corps. Man, the Marines is something else. [laughter] It's hard to get in and it's even more difficult to get out.

SH: Before we start talking about Raleigh and getting sworn in, had you heard of the Tuskegee Airmen?

DR: I had heard. I knew a lad from my hometown that had gone down there and that was in there, and I saw the picture with the goggles and stuff. I knew about that, but I wasn't particularly impressed with anything all-black. ... I just wasn't, you know. I had already been that. [laughter]

SH: Had your father given you any advice from his experience in war before you left?

DR: I would say, by the time I finished high school, my father was looking for advice from me, [laughter] as well as my grandmother.

SH: Okay, go ahead then with Raleigh.

DR: [laughter] They used to call, "Bubba, come here." It's true. So, they said, "Take these guys to Raleigh and get them sworn in and bring them back to the Marine base," and I've got to do this. So, we go to Raleigh, we get sworn in, bang, bang, take care of [our] pay. Then, the bus, we've got to catch a bus, six o'clock in the morning, to go to the Marine base. One guy's not there, and I'm [thinking], "Where is he? He's not going to listen to me, because he's as old as I am, or older, and maybe bigger than me, can beat me up." So, I called the local police. I said, "Would you go to this boy's house and get him and get him here?" Cops went and got him, brought him, put him [there], bang. He figured, "Whoever can do this, I'm not messing with him." [laughter] I did not know what else to do. So, we go to the Marine base and, there, we get the training, and it's tough, but, you know, being in the Boy Scouts, being agile, and not hostile, was essential for me to survive, because, for them, hostility was it, but I didn't have that. So, I had to make up for it by being quick, fast, wit and physics.

SH: Did you realize that African-Americans were only just recently being admitted into the Marines when you signed up?

DR: Not before. I only knew it from that group of fellows, when we were on our way. I never had an idea. I wanted to go in the Air Force. Perhaps I even wanted to be what I saw, that boy, in the picture, in one of the relative's houses. ... One of the lady's sons was there and wanted to be a pilot.

SH: Your training was at Fort Bragg.

DR: No, no, Fort Bragg was the induction. Then, you go to ...

SH: Then, you go to Raleigh, and then, to Camp Lejeune.

DR: You said it, Camp Lejeune. You know Camp Lejeune.

SH: Were you segregated for training? Did you have white drill instructors?

DR: Okay. [In] the Marines, blacks were unique. Every officer was white, every enlisted man was black, got that? Now, this is unique and it has, probably, more positives than negatives. In the first place, you were treated like any enlisted man, white, black, green, yellow, purple,

whatever, one hundred percent the same, and the officers just happened to be white, but they treated you just like an officer would treat any Marine. So, in that relationship, it was a lot less segregated than people would realize. That's the thing that I took exception with in one of Ken Burns' stories, that some Marine told him, who was in the 51st Defense Battalion, which I had been in before, and that is a cloudy version of what really happened. [Editor's Note: Mr. Robinson is referring to veterans interviewed for Ken Burns' *The War* documentary.] As far as the Marines were concerned, they probably were the less segregated of all of the services, because they were all enlisted men with everything that an enlisted man had, could do and be. If it was in an all-white outfit and he's going to be an enlisted man, he would not have been any different, white or black, ... if he was in that [unit].

SH: Equipped the same and trained the same way?

DR: Equipped, trained, everything.

SH: Okay.

DH: Precisely, and treated the same by the officers, one hundred percent. You would not know the officers were white. That is for sure. There was no way in the world that you saw anything that those officers [did that] would cause you to believe that was so because they were white, and you never had an officer who gave the impression that, "Ain't I glad I'm white?" never, you see. That defines the people, not what you say or do, but what people will perceive from your behavior, and the person [who is] out there helping blacks and all who's happy they aren't black is a liar, and those are the kind of people you have to beware of. You know, they're washing away their guilt and everything. You have to do it because it's so, because it's real, because that's who you are, not because you feel guilty or something, or you want to be a martyr or something. ... That's not true, but, then, I did not find that in the outfit I was in, and I happened to have been in that same outfit that this fellow was in. Now, they had some problems, being black, from the local people. I think, in Atlanta, Georgia, they shot up the train station. [laughter]

SH: Really?

DR: Because they're supposed to get off and exercise and the people at the train station said, "No. Black people [start] walking around here, boom, boom, boom," and put them back on the ... train. Now, that was incredible. Now, that happened. That's an incident that happened.

SH: Were you aware of it at the time?

DR: Oh, yes, oh, yes, that it happened. Not only that, but I got off the train and looked at it, because, when we came through there, it was not the same any more. ... Those people there learned, (don't mess with them boys?). [laughter] No, it's true. That happened. Those are true incidents. ... As far as I was concerned, ... there were so many relationships, basketball games and stuff between the whites and blacks, [in] the theaters and everything, the Marines that were non-coms were the same, white and black was the same, same place, same time, all the time, [in the] theater, whatever.

SH: Really?

DR: Was no separate one, was not.

SH: They did not send you to another part of the base to do your training.

DR: No, the first base was black. It was a black base, because that's where they inducted you and that's where you trained. All the non-coms were black, but, then, when you got into the battlefield, when you got into the area, you had Marines, Navy and Army all over, and the enlisted men were enlisted men and officers were officers.

SH: How long was your training at Lejeune?

DR: For me, I was in Lejeune, the total time, about a year.

SH: However, basic training is not ...

DR: Well, basic training was over in about ninety days or so.

SH: What did they send you to do then?

DR: Then, they'd give you a test and place you in a school. That's what happened to me. They put me in the school.

SH: Which school?

DR: Well, the school I went to was for telecommunications, and I'm in there, [laughter] I'm high school and everybody's college, college graduates, everybody. I'm the only little boy in there [who only] went to high school. How in the world [did] I get in here? The guy said, "We gave you this test, you know, to do these things," and I said, "Oh. So, I passed it?" ... He said, "You got a lot of them right." So, I was in that class and that's what we were studying and this was ... circuits and electricity and signaling and all that, something I'd never seen before, and, at first, it was memory to me and I couldn't do it too well. ... So, we were shooting pool there and I'm winning all the money, because I could shoot pool, and they said, "Any idiot can, you know, shoot pool, but you have to have a brain to be able to not have to be on guard duty because you were the lowest in the class." Well, I didn't take kindly to that. So, I decided, "Robinson, you've got to teach yourself again." So, I got my flashlight and, [at] lights out, I'd get under the covers and get the book [out], and I finished at the top. I know I got a stripe for it.

SH: This communication school was all-black.

DR: Yes, black, black teachers, but, there, [it] was all non-coms. It's all non-coms.

SH: Okay.

DR: So, that was in Lejeune, and Montford Point, it was called. See, the Navy, the Marines [are] part of the Navy, and the Navy was terribly segregated, but it did have it, but the Army had two things. The Army had a black army [laughter] and a white army. The Navy had blacks in the Navy, [laughter] and so, the Marines got blacks in the Marines. It's entirely different. So, even [though] the Navy was hard, even blacks fared better in the Navy than they did in the Army, because it [the Army] was all-black.

SH: Would you get leaves to go off post?

DR: Oh, yes.

SH: How were you treated? Were there buses off the post?

DR: Well, [laughter] it's interesting. With the busses, you have to stand in line, but you have to wait until all the white boys get on, and you have to be back at the base [at] the same time, and, many times, if you don't get back to base, you know, you got in trouble. ... The white officers that volunteered to be in the black side thing, I think some of them loved black people. I don't mean just liked them. They just, man, ... felt that nothing in the world [was] nicer than these people, and, [since] that's what they felt, that's what they would do. So, they would always be sticking us in places where we ought to be, but hadn't ever been. Are you with me on that? and I use that language to portray what I'm talking about. There's no way to sophisticatedly articulate that. So, they would actually send the MPs, the black MPs, down to monitor the thing, and so, [with] the black MPs, when you're in line, you go. The white Marines [were] thinking they were going to get on the bus, but they're going to wait until they're all there, on there, ... and he wouldn't let them on. It didn't take them long to get used to that. So, see, this is what I mean. Now, I don't know how the Army did it, but I can't imagine that they would put a black MP over the white people. Are you with me? but the Marines, those Marines, did that. Now, every once in awhile, we'd get a Marine officer recruit, new, "shavetail," who didn't know what was what, who still thought he knew how to take care [of us], you know, how to treat blacks, because he's from the South. ... He had a rude awakening, you know, because I can remember, when we're ready to come back, ... the Captain said, "All the Marines go there," and this white Marine said, "Well, were am I going to put my boys?" He said, "What? What are you talking about?" He said, "My Marines." He said, "I told you to put the damn Marines down there." [laughter] I said, "Oh, boy," but that's how it was. So, the Marine [Corps] was uniquely different than the Army, absolutely, and at least I can't find a black or white Marine that would tell you that they found a difference, especially once we got over there in "no man's land," you know.

SH: When you finished the telecommunications school, where were you sent?

DR: Was [sent for] more schooling, crypts [cryptography] and everything, and then, I got a promotion again. ... I became a corporal, so, I got a group, and we'd go down to the ocean and shoot out to ships [with artillery] and all that stuff. ... I can remember, we were down there and a tugboat would pull a target so many thousand yards away, and then, the guys practiced to shoot at that target, and I remember something, the guy on the ship is going like this, [using some signal, like semaphore or flashers]. Nobody can read this stuff, because it's too fast. The Navy guys are fast, but we're supposed to know how to read it. I'm down in the bottom and the people

in the tower, they don't know what's going on in there. So, somebody says, "What is he saying?" They don't know. They said, "Well, call Sarge." I was a sergeant by then, "Call Sergeant Robinson, he'll probably know." I don't know, and so, I run up the tower and [he] says, "What is he saying?" I say, "He's saying, 'Cease fire, cease fire.'" So, they ceased firing, and then, the thing waved off and left and that guy said, "Robinson, how do you read that stuff?" I said, [laughter] "Listen, I was watching the splashes. You were splashing closer to the tug than the target. You guys." [laughter] They were zeroed. This is the truth. They were zeroed in, but the radar thing had picked this one instead of this, the target behind. [laughter] This happened.

SH: I always wondered about those. You hear about that in the Air Corps, the poor guy that is pulling the target.

DR: Yes, the thing; it's that kind of thing. We did that. That's what kind of outfit we had, mostly that. As a matter-of-fact, my outfit, overseas, was guarding, I think, the XVIII Corps, the one that Pappy Boyington was in. [Editor's Note: Major (later Colonel) Gregory "Pappy" Boyington commanded VMF-214.] I told you [that] I was going to tell you later [about] some of the people; Bobby Troup, the guy who wrote *Route 66*, he was the rec [Special Services] officer. He wrote that going across the country. He wrote that song going across there. [Editor's Note: Bobby Troup wrote the song in early 1946, shortly after being discharged from the Marines, following a cross-country trip with his then wife. His wartime experiences in going to California inspired him to take the trip.] He was our rec officer. You would think he was black, that's for sure. You could never find him with the officers. [laughter] He was always putting on shows, the music, and his friend, who would come to the [shows] there, was Tyrone Power. They were inseparable.

SH: Really?

DR: It's fact, it's fact. ...

SH: This would be for coastal artillery defense.

DR: ... First, it was coastal, but, then, we also had the antiaircraft. At the end, we only needed antiaircraft. We didn't need the coastal anymore.

SH: Your training in Lejeune was for both.

DR: Both, coastal, the long-toms, [155-millimeter artillery?]. I'm surprised you know this stuff. [laughter] The long-toms, ... that's a cannon rifle, and then, the ninety-millimeters and "ack-acks" [small caliber antiaircraft guns] and things like that. As a matter-of-fact, our lads, ... the "ack-ack" guys, would actually fly on the Navy planes, in the back, to operate those guns. That's how integrated it got, you understand, after awhile. Then, nobody paid much attention to race. We played poker, ... everybody, drank the beer. This place, it was so integrated, you couldn't believe it. It wasn't this good in the country, in the States.

SH: Really? Your enlisted club and everything was really integrated.

DR: It's integrated. The Marine was a Marine. I tell you, I never saw one person that didn't respect every Marine, even walking down the street. If he's got his white girl, the [other] guy's got his black girl, they'll have a nice feeling for each other, even today, to this very day. I don't know what happened, but that camaraderie and what they taught you transcended things. The thing that was so important was the respect, that the Marine Corps sort of told you, first, you have to respect everybody. Second one, you were supposed to be, especially, a gentleman. [Concerning] ladies, no Marine, under any circumstance, any way, would insult a lady or even tolerate her being insulted. You were taught this, "You're a gentleman," and, third, you were taught to shoot, to kill, but take no pleasure in it. That's what the Marines instilled in you and, if you couldn't be that, you couldn't be a Marine, and they wouldn't think twice of getting rid of you.

SH: That was what I wanted to ask next. Was there an attrition rate and was it different from boot camp than in the different schools that you were in?

DR: I would say the attrition would happen in the boot camp. First place, they had selected [you]. ... I mean, I don't think anybody would be as judicious in selections as the Marine Corps, to start with. I don't think they liked to have you washed out. They don't like to be wrong in picking you in the first place, [laughter] because you don't get in there, you don't ever get to hold up your hand and get sworn into the Marine Corps, and get kicked out, but some did. Some got in and weren't worthy, and some of the places in the country were getting rid of people and they didn't care from nothing about the Marines, or this or that and the other. You understand? ... They were people, "You committed this crime, and, [if] you go in the service, we'll let you go." It was cheaper than incarcerating [them] and stuff. That happened a lot, that happened a lot, but the Marines would be looking. They wouldn't want those people, and, you know, they were able to be selective.

SH: Did any of the men from your high school stay with you as you progressed through your training?

DR: [laughter] Well, I guess I was unique, because all of those guys were put into outfits where you load bombs and lift bales, which was the first instance that higher-ups decided they needed [African-American Marines]; they could use these Marines for that and the white Marines could fight. We would relieve that, and that's what they were, casualty outfits, they called them, and that's what that fellow had alluded to with [Ken] Burns. I don't know how he made out after he went overseas, but he was with one of the two fighting outfits, which ... were defense battalions.

SH: After you were put in charge of the group as a corporal, where did they send you next? How much longer were you at Lejeune?

DR: When we left Lejeune, we went ... overseas.

SH: Did you have a leave to go home?

DR: Yes. I had a leave of, like, two weeks or something, a week, whatever. Then, we went to [Camp] Pendleton, [near San Diego], and the Lockheed people said to the camp [officers], "You

guys ... will be here for so many months before you leave. We don't know how many, we don't even care, but you could give these guys three-day passes and they could come up to Lockheed and work on an assembly line, to stock the line and stuff." So, we did that. So, we would go and they would pay us. I don't know, ... we got a dollar an hour, whatever it was. We did that because we had nothing else to do, no more schooling then, but I had gone to all the schooling that you could imagine.

SH: Is this Lockheed in ...

DR: Burbank.

SH: Oh, in California.

DR: Lockheed Hudson, making the planes. We made the P-40s [P-38s?] and stuff. [Editor's Note: Lockheed's facilities in Burbank produced several aircraft, including Hudson bombers and P-38 fighters. Curtiss-Wright produced the P-40.] So, we all [worked there], many of us, not everybody. ... You know, a guy with these stripes, they put me in charge of the guys to stock the line. It was ... done so efficiently. They made use of the Marines who were waiting, giving them something to do, keeping them active, because it was not good to have Marines sitting around, waiting to go overseas, for two, three months. That was not a good thing to do, to [just] take them on a hike or something like that, or a little calisthenics or something, but this was unique and I thought that was [something]. I didn't see how anybody could beat America after I went through that, and then, to see the structures where they make the planes. ... You look like you're going into the side of a mountain and you go in there and there's a whole big factory and stuff. You can't even tell this from the outside. I said to myself, "I love myself [this is] some America, because they aim to win this one." They were good, and, therefore, that was enriching, and they wanted those Marines. Boy, they bypassed the Navy and everything. All we saw was a bunch of Marines going to Lockheed to work, boom, bang, and then, when we got ready to go overseas, Lockheed gave the Navy all kinds of stuff for us, recreation gear, money to buy food and stuff for parties and stuff, when you get into Hawaii and all. I tell you, ... you couldn't believe [it].

SH: You did this for about three months then.

DR: For about three months, yes.

SH: Wow.

DR: Yes, oh, yes. It was something. I thought that was unique. ... I would say that kind of a behavior and that kind of thought, that kind of uniqueness in employing something that would ordinarily be just wasted, was really good. ... They did it and it worked and it got [our] cooperation, and [we would] go, bang, and [work] your three days, boom, you come back, you go back, and you do it and it was really nice. ... They would pay you every day, if you wanted it. ...

SH: This was in addition to your base Marine pay.



DR: Oh, yes, that was on your own. It was, like, beautiful. [laughter] Could you imagine? and I really loved it, because I was in charge. [laughter] I didn't have to work.

SH: Let us go back to Lejeune. Were there any rumors about what you were going to do next?

DR: ... Well, we knew we were going overseas.

SH: Did you know ...

DR: Where?

SH: European or Japanese Theater?

DR: I mean, it was [no question]; oh, yes, the Marines only went [to the Pacific]. They had very few Marines [that] went over to Europe. We were trained for a South Pacific-type environment, type of warfare and everything. You were trained for that and we were trained to defend airstrips. ... You would find a bunch of Seabees and us together, Seabees making it and us keeping it, and the Marines taking it, Seabees repairing it, Marines protecting it. That was what it was. ...

SH: You did have training with the Seabees in Lejeune.

DR: Yes; no, no, this only happened overseas, because the Seabees would build the airstrips and we would guard the airstrips. So, the relationship was just [that] ... we would be at the same place, you follow? I don't think I was ever in a place where there weren't Seabees, because we were always with the airstrip, as a matter-of-fact.

SH: Did you know that that was what you would be doing when you were still stateside in Lejeune?

DR: Stateside, in Lejeune, we could see the air squadrons and paratroopers' [in the] white camp, over there, and we were over here and we'd be shooting at the targets and stuff. We knew that this was part of the same type of thing. In other words, airplanes and air artillery, you know what I'm saying, antiaircraft fire and stuff like that? That, it's always in the same area.

SH: You finished this and that was when you got your orders to go to the West Coast.

DR: Right.

SH: How did they transport you and how did that go?

DR: Okay, if you ever heard the song, *Get Your Kicks On Route 66*, [laughter] well, we went the southern route, and then, through Texas, then, we went along Route 66, into the ...

SH: By truck or train?

DR: No, by train, and it was [that] you're on there [for] days. As a matter-of-fact, that's the train that pulled through in Georgia. [When] we got off and exercised, they didn't bother us this time and we saw it all, the marks and stuff from when the other outfit was there, because, ... you know, what a difference six months makes.

SH: You knew that that had happened and you were prepared for it.

DR: Oh, yes. Oh, the world knew that happened. Everybody knew that happened. So, I think when that train's coming through, the guy says, "I'm not going to let you get off and exercise," and ... those colonels and things, I mean, they sort of despised the behavior. If you felt that way, you're supposed to keep it to yourself, you know what I'm saying? We're at war now, you know, and you put that on ice. He's not telling you what to think, but he's telling you what not to do. So, "These are my boys, I'm going to exercise them," and get all bang, bang, bang, and they're going to say, "Keep them on the train," when we came. So, you know.

SH: How often would you stop and exercise?

DR: At least every day.

SH: Did you?

DR: I don't remember exactly, but I know for sure we stopped there, and then, ... the only thing I remember coming back, I remember stopping in Reno, because I almost got left. [laughter] That, I remember; the train was moving. That, I remember; I would never forget that.

SH: What had you been doing in Reno?

DR: That's right. [laughter] Whatever you think is much less than what I really did. [laughter] Oh, boy, oh, yes, I'll never forget that, yes.

SH: How many men from your unit were on the train?

DR: Coming back or going?

SH: Going.

DR: Everybody on there is part of the unit.

SH: Okay, it was the whole train.

DR: The whole battalion.

SH: Okay.

DR: It's a battalion. It was the 52nd Defense Battalion, probably two thousand people, and we stayed together. ...

SH: You just went straight through to Burbank.

DR: No, we went to the camp, ... near San Diego. ... You know the camp.

RP: Pendleton?

DR: Pendleton, went to Camp Pendleton, yes, Camp Pendleton, yes, that's right, and we were there for about three months, I think. ... Maybe it was less, less; it was less, a lot less.

SH: What did you know of the Japanese as an enemy, as opposed to the Italians and the Germans?

DR: I knew very little about the Japanese, except what I had seen in the movies, you know, the movies, the Japanese and the Bataan [Death March] and all that. It was really impossible for me to believe that there was a race of people like that. I couldn't believe that, and it turned out they weren't a race of people like that. [laughter] It was a war and these people were whatever you want to say; brainwashed is what had happened, but, certainly, if you know any Japanese people, you'll know for sure that they were led, that they are faithful followers.

SH: It was more the movies that shaped your perception, rather than what the Marines taught you in training.

DR: The Marines never taught us anything about the person that you're fighting, like hate the enemy. They just told you, "Just kill him, but take no pleasure in it."

SH: Okay.

DR: In other words, don't be happy to do it and, when you come back, don't be sad that you did it. The Marines, obviously, know that hand-to-hand combat, that kind of fighting, not getting up in the window, shooting. This is almost like the [American] Revolution, bayonets. It's a different war, an entirely different war, you know.

SH: In the three months that you were in Pendleton, you would get a three-day pass to work in Lockheed.

DR: Yes.

SH: How were you treated there?

DR: Like I was not black or red or yellow or green or nothing. They respected stripes more than anything else. [laughter] The guy figured, if you've got the stripes, you were able to do this. So, you'd take these six men and keep that line [stocked]. ... "You put the left-hand landing gear [in], you do the right-hand landing gear," boom, boom, boom, "You see that this thing is done,"

bang. In the town, everybody loves you. Everywhere you see a Marine, boom, an officer, bang; they were just happy.

SH: The bang, may I say for the record, is a salute.

DR: It's like what you call certifying we are the same, certifying we're in this together, certifying we will take care of each other, certifying we have the same aim, certifying that fact, the war is the war and we are on the same side. That's what it said, and that, today, I don't care where I am, if I see a Marine and he knows I'm a Marine, I have to tell him, "I can't; I ... already had two beers." You understand what I'm saying? I'm saying, from the worst things, sometimes, some very good things can come of it. I think that more progress was made during that war than people could ever imagine, as devastating as it was. I think the positive part of it turned out to be better. Just the education for the GIs alone is staggering, and if you would imagine what it goes to, and the treatment of blacks alone changed drastically. I doubt very many soldiers who went back to their hometown had the same attitude toward blacks. I cannot believe they did. Do you understand?

SH: I do.

DR: Because he would have reason to hate other people who might be a different color, if he had the ability to hate. Not having that, [laughter] I don't know how he fared, but, seriously, how can you hate these wonderful people in America who are Americans [that] happen to be black, as opposed to [white]? We just fought someone who isn't black that would've killed me. So, I'm sure, a lot, it softened it, it softened the hearts of people. ... There were many people down there [in the South], I know for sure, especially some ... that have some of the same blood. That was not for this, but, if they had opposed it, they would have been ostracized. It would have been at their peril to support that feeling, but where I lived, and then, all the people I knew, they didn't care. I remember sitting in front of my fireplace, with a little white friend of mine, this is in North Carolina, sitting down there, and her mother looked and she realized that my eyes are wider apart. She did not know about race, skeletons and all, and his eyes are closer together. ... She just saw that for the first time, when we were sitting there, little kids, buddies, white kids, you understand? I've always had so many friends who were white, when I was in North Carolina. ... You can't believe the relationship that the black and white people had in North Carolina. I guarantee you, it was nowhere near like the [other] places, and I think those ones, ... where these things have come up, have been exaggerated for the purpose of even selling copy or to meet the needs of someone who needed it to be bad. So, even when they happened, I don't think they were nearly as bad in fact as they were ... as related.

SH: Going back to California and the three months that you were there working at Lockheed, at this point, do you have any idea in your head that you are interested in engineering?

DR: ... I don't know how exactly, but I'll tell you this. In the Marines, most of the electrical engineering is mathematics, and applied mathematics is knowing what the mathematics means. I learned that many people remember the answers to questions they've been asked. If they've never been asked, ... they can't remember it, but I was able to devise and understand things that I had never been asked and predict what will happen. So, that's how I got ahead of everybody,

because I understood the subject. They'd (sell?) networks, calculate; boom, I could do it. I could do it even in my head, do you understand? because I understood what it was. It wasn't that I had to remember it. That's what happened. So, doing that, I was able to take something mathematical and come up with something physical. So, then, I was able to understand the things that the other people are trying to learn. So, then, I'm able to help. That's where I found out, when I help you understand something, not only do you get to understand, but I get to understand it even better. ... I consolidated it. So, this is the thing that caused me to want to be into this subject. So, I decided I wanted to be a physicist. So, when ... I wrote the university [and] said, "I would like to be in physics," and they said, "We don't have any room, but we do have this engineering school and ... we don't have many people applying [there]. You can apply for that and you'll be taking some of the same courses and you can transfer next year to physics." So, I go to [the] university. We're getting a little ahead, but ... this will answer the question. So, [I] go to the university and I'm taking the engineering; it was, like, incredible. The teachers gave me a job as a lab instructor. I'm a freshman, taking the first courses, "As" in everything, including the algebra or college algebra and all that stuff, and then, when this year is over, they said, "We've got the room for you," and I said, "Forget about it." [laughter] I was already making a monthly stipend for being the lab guy. Making the course was so easy, and I had taken some courses through the mail while I was overseas, after the war was over, took some engineering courses, because they had them. ... It was math, it was math. I always liked it. So, that's what happened to me, and that's how I got to be where I [got] the job.

SH: I was wondering if your interest in the subject was piqued at all while you were in Lockheed.

DR: That was more labor. ... I knew the name of the parts and what they did, but I had no interest. It was aeronautics. I had no real interest in that, but I was interested in the money and what we did with it. [laughter]

SH: That is fair enough. I just wondered.

DR: Well, you know, ... like I said, when the truth is exciting, I'm going to tell it. [laughter]

SH: Tell me about the orders that you get now. You are being sent from Pendleton to Hawaii.

DR: ... Okay, we were going overseas. ... First, we were going to land on some island, Eniwetok, it was called, staging to go up, because, in this time, they're fighting in Guam, Saipan, Tinian and Iwo, and, if they take the island, the Seabees go in, [laughter] and then, we're coming. ... So, the first one we went up [to], from Eniwetok, it was, like, Thanksgiving of '44, ... we went up to Guam, because we had Guam, and then, they're fighting in Eniwetok and, I mean, not Eniwetok, but in Tinian and Saipan. ... Then, soon as they got that, we went over there. Now, somehow, we always followed the air squadrons, and the air squadrons are going as close [as possible], as soon as you take an island, you secure it. The security, ... that's us. We were called a defense battalion. We were defense, not offense, and we protected the air squadrons and the base, and so, from there, we're there, as a matter-of-fact, I think we were on Tinian when the *Enola Gay* left. We were guarding the strip that was there.

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Reviewed by Kristie Thomas 9/7/09

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/21/09

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 9/23/09

Reviewed by Anstella Robinson 8/23/15