

John Cannon

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Question: Let's start by having you give me your name and the correct spelling of it and your address and phone number so I'll have that on tape. If you could go ahead and do that.

Answer: I'm John Cannon, I live at 5529 26th Avenue South, 98108, that's in Seattle, Washington.

Question: And phone number?

Answer: My phone number is area code 555-555-5555.

Question: That allows me to set my audio levels.

Question: What ah, um, well lets start with what branch of the service you were in.

Answer: I was in the Army. I was in the Army medical service Corp. I was a commissioned officer and I retired in 1966 at 24 years of service as Lieutenant Colonel.

Question: So you did, I assume, a double duty.

Answer: Double duty...

Question: WWII and Korea

Answer: Yeah yeah yeah, ok ok ok I'll level with you (laughs) I did do the Korean thing also.

Question: Hm wow, wow. So how old were you when you got in the service?

Answer: I came in at 19, 18 pushed it up to 19.

Question: Did you enlist, drafted...

Answer: I enlisted in the Army in Los Angeles. My family, we're from Louisiana and during the great migration of blacks from the south in the 1930's one of my sisters had married and moved to Los Angeles and ah, so that's when general migration of blacks from the south was going on. And I went there to finish high school. My mother had died and so when I graduated high school I ah, war, this was 1942, the war, World War II was going in full bloom and they came through the schools asking us to take tests to see how good we could do. And I did so-so on the test and I was one of the people from our school who were chosen to go up to (inaudible) Stanford University program to do, learn how to do inspections of aircraft. And ah, one of the things that they held out that we would be a war, in war deferment because the draft was going on. And I did that and I did ok but while I was there taking the course there was this radio commercial that came on three or four times a day "Negroes you too can fly. Join the Army Air Corp and go to Tuskegee and be a pilot." And that just hung in there with me so I did enlist and I went to Tuskegee and I didn't make a pilot, you know I washed out up there, down there. And then I went to administration school and ultimately I was commissioned through OCS as a Medical Administrative Corp, MAC at that time, which has been changed after that to Medical Services Corp. And that was how I.. and I liked it, it liked me, so we stayed.

Question: And you're all of like twenty-years-old now or something by this time.

Answer: Yeah, yeah, old soldier.

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Question: So where did you get sent then?

Answer: Well, through the years, you know I had different kinds of assignments. And one of my assignments I had seen also about the black paratroopers and I wanted to be a troop paratrooper, but because I was a medic at the time, all of the black paratroopers were infantryman, they didn't have what they have now. So what happened was to become a paratrooper I had to change my branch to infantry, which I did. And I changed my branch to infantry and I went, that's where I joined the 555, the triple nickel, as an infantry platoon leader. And after I got out of that I went back to my Corp, the Medical Service Corp and that's where, my original Corp, and that's, I retired as a Medical Service Corp Officer, Medical Administrator in the ah, civilian world it would be the hospital administrators and, you know, all of that kind of duties. Our task was to do the doctor's, to put it simply, the doctors practiced the medicine, we made sure they had everything they need to practice medicine, the doctors and nurses. And they, we would make sure they had all of the equipment, the creature comforts, and then the Army, security, and you know all of that sort of things. You've seen the MASH program? Ah Radar would be (laughs), I would be a Radar. A commissioned Radar ok? (laughs) And we, you know, we kept the doctors happy and supplied.

Question: So did you end up overseas during World War II?

Answer: Oh yeah. I didn't go overseas during World War II, I went during the Korean War. I was scheduled to go overseas when I went to the paratroopers, and then that, by that time, by the time I finished and got into that, World War II had ended but then I was at Korea, we went to, and the Korea with the 187th Airborne, by the time I was paratrooper and I went to 187th Airborne and we ah we were part of that stuff.

Question: You know I never thought about this but, 'cause I interviewed one that, and I always say it wrong, the Tuskegee...

Answer: The Tuskegee airmen.

Question: Yeah I always want to pronounce it wrong all the time, and I can't think of the gentleman's name but I did ask him this question 'cause he did tell me about, about how that was expected to be a failure, they didn't want them to succeed.

Answer: Um hm, right.

Question: Was it different, I mean I don't know how you would, not different...

Answer: Well let's put it this way, let's put it this way. Incidentally I took my basic training, that's when I came in, I wanted to be a Tuskegee airman, and that's where I took my training with them in Georgia, ah, what's the name of that, I forgot, what's the name of that? Tuskegee, Tuskegee! Yeah it was at Tuskegee, yeah Tuskegee. And I took my basic training down there, see, and they had people there that a lot of guys, and they were guys then, not women, a lot of the guys they got short shrift, you know, they got accused of different things, you know efficiency ratings and all you know. And if they got someone unfriendly, and there were a heck of a lot of unfriendly people, well a lot of the people who should have done better if they'd have had a clean, fair shot. So it was, a lot of fellows who we knew who should not have been washed out. Both in the paratroopers and in the pilot training. You know, that's that ah, but there were some commanders who were not good and they were not nice and they had a reputations and there were some who were nice, and ah I never will forget, we never will forget General Gavin, I'm talking about my paratrooper days, General Gavin, who

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was a gentleman and a soldier and ah, who really appreciated fairness. So you had the different kinds of dynamics.

Answer: Also another thing that entered into this whole military racial thing. Ah, there was a time when ah, as an officer now, if I was your rater I rated you and sent your rating on to Washington, you know, through the channels of Washington, you never saw your rating. And then when you get transferred someplace so you'd come up for promotion, you didn't get promoted or you would, and you didn't know why. Ok. Then that changed that you had to have a rater, and an endorser, you know someone between you and the top man, and the rated, the person being rated, had to see it before it was sent to the Action General, and have an opportunity to make a comment. So if somebody, if I felt I was getting an unfair rating I could make a comment about that and it had to go to the Action General's office. Ok. Well that kind of put the squeeze on unfair ratings ok. That helped a lot. Another dynamic is that as the services began to increase, you know, you had this pyramid kind of thing, you had so many colonels, so many generals, so many lieutenant colonels, so many captains, whereas before you had all these folks. Well the keener, the sharper it got then the more competition began at that level, you know, level close to the top. So if you, if you had a reputation, say like you were a lieutenant colonel, and you were on the list, meaning you had enough time and grade and that sort of stuff, to be considered for colonel. Well suppose, I'm just making numbers, numbers don't fit here, suppose there were of 200 of you in that zone but there were only 75 spaces, that meant 125 of you were not going to be promoted. Ok, so now they started, they looked at all kinds of things of things, you know, the board, properly. And looked at all kinds of things, your rep. your medals, your this, your that, and your complaints, you see. So anything that could push you off of the thing, you say well I better be cool about this, 'cause you know, I'd get a reputation, and then he doesn't get promoted and that sort of thing. So a lot of dynamics came into being and the promotion and assignments, good or, you know every assignment is a good assignment (laughs) or not so good an assignment. You know. And when those kind of things entered into the picture that sort of, well it didn't level the playing field but it, it helped.

Question: Just one thing real quick here, so you know, some of the people talked about World War II galvanizing America, but it sounds like it didn't galvanize racism. I mean it didn't, racism, that there was this proud to be an American but yet racism stayed?

Answer: Well yeah, there, is the year 2000. There's still a segment in our society, who believes that America doesn't belong to all Americans, that America is theirs and some others are interlopers, you know. And ah, I suppose that will always be. I imagine in England in France, in other countries older than we, that you still have some of that attitude about the people, you know, the foreigners (laughs). So I guess that's just a human dynamic. However, we have things ah, different/better/different in the sense that um, we have more outlets for uh, recompense that, I have more channels, if you abuse me racially, I've got more channels now than I had 20 years ago.

Question: Ok I've got to switch tapes here.