

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series
Hillard Pouncy Interview
Conducted by James Newberry
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Transcribed by Lauren Hohn

Full Transcript

Interviewer: All right, this is James Newberry and I'm here with Hillard Pouncy on Monday July 7th, 2014, and we're at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University. And Dr. Pouncy, do you agree to this interview?

Pouncy: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: All right, so, could you state your full name?

Pouncy: Hillard Warren Pouncy Junior.

Interviewer: And when and where were you born?

Pouncy: I was born in Prichard, Alabama, February 8th, 1922.

Interviewer: And Dr. Pouncy, could you describe your—your childhood and your early family life?

Pouncy: I had one brother and two sisters. I lived with them for about 3 or 4—maybe 8 years, and then it was decided that...I should live with my grandparents. You must remember, in the early days, social security wasn't invented, and when people got old, they get a grandniece, a grandchild, a grand-something to come and live with them, so I lived with my grandparents all the way through high school.

Interviewer: And where did your grandparents live?

Pouncy: They lived on a little town on the Chattahoochee River, not too far from here, in a town called Eufaula, Alabama, in Barbour County.¹

Interviewer: Tell me about Eufaula.

Pouncy: Well, Eufaula is on the bluff of the Chattahoochee River, and it's called "The Bluff City." It was a small town when I lived there, about 6,000 people, and it was about 50% black and 50% white. My—my father, my grandfather was a janitor at the First Methodist Church, and as he got older, I had to pick up that job, so I was probably one of the youngest janitors you ever heard of.

¹ "Here" being Kennesaw, Georgia in the Piedmont area.

Interviewer: So, in Eufaula, did—did you experience discrimination?

Pouncy: I can best answer that by asking you, when you were young, did the sun shine? You become accustomed to things. You may not like it, but that's the way it is. And...you're taught, or you begin to believe, that you have an activity to do, and it's your job to do that activity and do it well. Go to school, do your best in school. And we were led to believe that if you did a good job, sooner or later, one way or another, it would pay off.

Interviewer: So you worked as a janitor then, and when you were very young, in that Methodist church, and did you attend high school in Eufaula?

Pouncy: Yes. We didn't have a high school, we had tenth grade, and when you finished the tenth grade, that was the end of the line. Now the other school system across town where I couldn't go, of course they had high school. So at the end of tenth grade, I was out of school. I dropped out for a whole year. Fortunately, the Board of Education saw fit to give us one more grade, and after staying that one year, I went back and I finished eleventh grade. So at my school, I never really finished high school there, I finished eleventh grade. Where did I finish high school? Well we went to the next county and in that county, we had high schools, so I went there and I got my high school training, I finished in Henry County, in Abbeville, Alabama.

Interviewer: And what kind of student were you?

Pouncy: What kind of student was I? [*chuckles*] Not bad, not bad. Actually, I was the valedictorian of the class.

Interviewer: And what were your best subjects?

Pouncy: I can tell you my worst subject. I didn't like History. [*chuckles again*] I didn't like Sociology. I liked...the sciences. I liked Mathematics. But I could pass them, I could pass all the courses. I—I really don't remember when I could not read.

Interviewer: So, who was the sort of driving force when you were young and encouraging you to get an education, or was it more just inside of you?

Pouncy: I think a lot of it was inside. My—my grandfather...I never heard him mention going to school at all, but he could read, and he could write his name. My grandmother could not read, could not write. And I—I didn't think reading was a big deal, so I said, "Grandma—Big Ma," I called her, I said, "I can show you how to read." She said, "Ain't no little old boy goin' show *me* how to read!" And of course, I didn't. Later on, very much later on, she wished she had learned to read, but she never learned to read. My house...my—we talk about not having

pluming, but our house never had a newspaper, a newspaper never came to our house. But that was not a big deal because when I went to school, I went through a nice neighborhood and they would throw a newspaper on the sidewalk to each of the houses, and by the time I got to the end of the street, I would have read the newspaper by just walking along. [*chuckles*]

Interviewer: So that was the way that you kept up with the news and what was—

Pouncy: Yes.

Interviewer: —going on in the world?

Pouncy: That's the way. Also, I had some very good friends who would subscribe to all the new magazines, wonderful magazines, and they would keep them for a month or so, and they wouldn't throw them out, and they would give them away so when I got them, I would have a feast reading them.

Interviewer: So what sort of big events, what sort of headlines, do you remember from those days?

Pouncy: I think the headline that really caught my attention, well, when World War Two came and we were worried about the "Germans have taken this town, the Germans have taken that town," and people would turn their radios up loud and we would hear that and hear that. And I would talk to some of the older people who—veterans of World War One, and I would ask them about World War One because somehow I knew that in a few years, or maybe a few months, I just felt that we were gonna be in the war, too, and I wondered how would I react in the war. And I would ask them, "Did you ever kill anybody?" And they—they would shy away from that, no one liked to talk about that, so I never got any good answers there.

Interviewer: So, when you finished that...I guess it was the eleventh grade in Henry County, Abbeville—

Pouncy: I finished eleventh grade in Eufaula...after staying out a year. They added eleventh grade. Then, I left Eufaula and I went to Henry County. Now, that was the—president in those days, I think his name was Mr. Roosevelt, and he had a alphabet, you know the NRA, the NYA, and the CCC, well I became a part of NYA, National Youth Association.² And somehow, they had some money and by

² NRA: The National Recovery Administration was a New Deal agency that supported fair-practice and protected workers by minimum wage, hour limits, and collective bargaining (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

CCC: The Civilian Conservation Corps was a New Deal program that provided conservation work for (typically) unmarried men in exchange for shelter, food, medical care, etc. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

going to that school and working, by cutting firewood or sweeping the floors, I made enough money to pay my way at the school in Henry County, paid my room and board there.

Interviewer: So you had to pay for housing in order to go to this final grade of school?

Pouncy: Yes, I did.

Interviewer: And you did that through the NYA?

Pouncy: NYA, mmm-hmm.

Interviewer: So when did you enroll in the Tuskegee Institute?

Pouncy: I could go back and figure up the year, if I could think that far back, but after high school in Henry County, I learned the Tuskegee would offer people jobs. They would give 'em work scholarships, and if you would come to Tuskegee and wan—and you were willing to work, you could just about work your way through school. So the summer before I was supposed to go to college, I went to Tuskegee, and they gave me a job. The first job they gave me, I really liked it, it was in the...farm shop and there was machinery there, so that was wonderful. It was inside, out of the sun, not air conditioned, but I didn't have to go in the sun. And later on, the...professor who was sponsoring me came in and said, "We got to take you away from this job and we gonna send you to the farm because we got to...gather the hay." Well, after all you've got to make hay while the sun shines, so I went out and I got a pretty good job there. All I had to do was drive their wagons. Somebody else would load the hay. But I was fairly young, fairly strong, and most of the people were older guys. And they couldn't have this young "buck" sitting on that wagon, driving these horses, doing nothing while they were loading hay. So they had a meeting, I was not in the middle of that meeting, and they decided I should load the hay. So, I did. Now, loading hay, there's a technique to it: they pile the hay up, and it stays out for four or five days, or maybe a week or so, and they kind of dry, and then you take a pitchfork and you throw it up on the wagon. So I was doing that, and I was getting pretty good at it, now I'm a little taller than most of the people so I could throw it way up. Well, one day I did that and as I was throwing it up, all of a sudden these guys had their pitchforks and shovels and whatever just beating at my feet. And I wondered what—what they were doing, I thought they were attacking me, and some guy said, "Don't move! Don't move!" And I didn't move. And then they stopped and just looked down. Two snakes were at my feet. Now, I looked at the snake. [*while laughing*] One of them was kinda fat and big and one was kinda skinny and big. So they were different snake—they were...and there was a great discussion about snakes. Some said they were Highland, Moccasin. They were

NYA: The National Youth Administration was a New Deal organization that offered part-time work for students and young people (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

not rattlesnakes. Well, there was an old gentleman there who was not excited, and I was scared, really scared, I was very scared, and that old guy just wasn't concerned, and his name was Mr. Good. I said, "Mr. Good, w-w-why didn't you care about me?" He said, "Look, son, this is mating season, and those snakes got better things to do than bite you!" [*chuckles*] Well, I lived through that with two dead snakes.

Interviewer: So, can you describe the city of Tuskegee and Tuskegee Institute when you first came there, what sort of place it was?

Pouncy: When I first went there, the director who was sponsoring me, he took me to a small house, and there were four or five cots in the house, and he showed me the bathroom.³ And he said, "Maybe you can cook something there." And...he says, "The facilities are not very good, but the price is right. It won't cost you anything." So I had free...rent. Then I got a job at the local...restaurant...as a short-order cook. I got pretty good at it. So I got my meals at this restaurant and I had a place so sleep, so my food and my room didn't cost anything. And he says, "Now, Hill, we will—if you want to—we will let your wife—" let *his* wife—"save your money for you." So every pay day, I would take out what I thought I'd need to live on, which wasn't much, and I would give it to him—his wife—and she took the same money and put it in an envelope, and said, "Now when September come, maybe you'll have enough for tuition." And they gave it all back to me, and I did have enough for Sept—for tuition when September came around.

Interviewer: So...how big of a town was it? Was...what was the environment like? Was it exciting, a lot of people, you know, deciding to start school, that sort of thing?

Pouncy: Well, there is a town called Tuskegee, but the institute was a place to itself. It had its own heating system. It had its own big cafeteria. So the institute was really a small town all by itself. I think the enrollment at Tuskegee, somehow I get the idea it was between 1 and 2,000, so it was a small school, and we didn't go to town too much because there was much more at the school than there was at town. So, most of us didn't associate with the town at all.

Interviewer: Okay, and what sort of professors did you have? Were there big personalities on campus? People that you remember well?

Pouncy: I think the man that I remember well, remember best, was the guy who ran the horse barn, and he was a kinda folksy guy. And we would tell us about life...much more than he would tell us about the subject. And we used to ask him, "How we gonna work when we get out of here? Are we gonna get a job?" And he would say, "Well, there isn't too much to worry about." And we said,

³ The director: Possibly Dr. Frederick D. Patterson was president of Tuskegee 1935-1953 (*Tuskegee University*).

“We may not be qualified for these jobs.” He said, “Don’t worry about that, either. If you get a job that’s too big for you, and you a good man, you’ll grow to the job. And you’ll get bigger and the job’ll get bigger.” Sounds pretty good. Then we said, “What if the job is so big, we can’t grow to it?” He says, “Still no problem. If the job’s too big for you and you can’t grow to the job, just cut the job down to your size.” And we’d laugh at that and we’d keep on. Mr. Woods was his name. I liked him very much.

Interviewer: Was that useful advice for you in your career?

Pouncy: Yes, it was *real* advice because sometime I worked for a lot of people, and sometime the job was too big for the boss, and he’ll fix it. This is why a person takes over a department and the department grows, some people take over the department and the department shrinks, so it always works out.

Interviewer: So you said that you had—the biggest headline you remember is the war in Europe.

Pouncy: Yes.

Interviewer: And...so you would have become aware of that probably before you went to Tuskegee...but...were you expecting war, were you expecting to serve as a soldier in the war?

Pouncy: I just about knew it was gonna happen. I was the right age. I was about...18, 19 at that time, and...I felt I was gonna go. I did learn, however, that if you volunteer, sometime you can pick the service that you want, and when I got to Tuskegee...it had just been decided that they were gonna let black people fly. Oooh-wee! And I would see these black cadets marching on Tuskegee’s campus, flying these airplanes, and I said, “Ah! Gotta be there, gotta fly!” But the Air Force had very high requirements. Initially, you had to have two years of college just to get into the Air Force. Later, that was changed. All you had to do was pass an examination. So at the end of my sophomore year, I decided to try for the Air Corps. And I took the exam and I passed and I was accepted.

Interviewer: And so, you said you saw the cadets walking around on campus, and what was it about them...that particularly appealed to you? Did they have advantages on campus?

Pouncy: Well...they...they really didn’t walk about, they marched about. They had jobs to do and they were always very busy. But I liked the uniform. But I think most of all, I liked the fact that the girls liked them. [*chuckles*] I learned that most of ’em were...college graduates, and they went to big schools, bigger than Tuskegee, and we would...wish that we could have gone to those kinds of schools.

Interviewer: So you were accepted into the program and how did...when did you enter and when did the training begin?

Pouncy: Because they need a lot of flyers, the educational requirements were changed. They were given exam to be accepted, and then they would send you to college for a few weeks to learn what they thought was needed for you to be able to go to the flying school, and they called it College Training Program, or something of that nature. So when I was accepted, I came back to Tuskegee and I stayed at the same dormitory I lived in as a student, so we stayed there a few weeks, maybe five or six weeks, and then we went to the actual army base to begin training to become flying people.

Interviewer: And that was in Tuskegee?

Pouncy: That was in Tuskegee. This big base was built to train black people to fly. It's called the Tuskegee Army Flying School, that was the name of it. There was...a great effort to get as many black people involved as possible, so they got a black contractor to build the base, I think it was called McKissack & McKissack out of Tennessee. I—I didn't know them, but they built the base.

Interviewer: So can you describe the training process?

Pouncy: The...Air Corps...has very high standards, as I pointed out a minute ago that it—originally, you had to have a college education, or two years of college just to be accepted for training, and the training was very rigorous—physically and mentally. You must be well disciplined to be an Air Force personnel. So at the training, we went there and we had Ground School, we had Physical Training, we had to take push ups, sit ups, get very...good physical condition. I was able to meet...a lot of youngsters from other parts of the nation: California, New York, one boy there from Alabama...we're about the same age, of course. We looked alike. They used to call us "The Gold Dust Twins." [*chuckles*] He finished—he was able to go ahead, and he went to combat. He got shot down. He lived through it, and after combat, he came—I came back to school, and he came back one time to visit me, and he told me how he got shot down, why he got shot down, and we had a long talk. He's no longer here. He's gone on now.

Interviewer: So this...training process, people would have to obviously—some would become pilots, some would, you know, serve in other capacities on the plane. Could you tell—tell me a little bit about that?

Pouncy: Well, when the program first got started...the pilots were going to be fighter pilots. One person, one engine. And, for every plane, for every person that's in the sky, there are dozens of people on the ground that keep those planes flying. So people had to go to school to learn to be radio mechanics, engine mechanics, propeller mechanics, and they went to different schools to get their training, and of course they came to Tuskegee, and they put together a combat unit...and these

guys was one squadron, I don't know how many people there...but they were called the 99th Squadron, and eventually they got enough of them together to send them to combat, and they did.⁴ And they went to combat. I don't remember the unit that they joined, but the guy who ran that unit...didn't want them. And they stayed there for about three or four days, or three or four weeks, and...the commander said, "We don't want them. We don't need them. They're no good." But one member of that group was named Benjamin O. Davis, he was a West Point-er, and he had quite a story to tell just getting through West Point, but that's another story.⁵ And when it was decided that these guys had to go back, they weren't gonna keep them, I think it was Captain Davis then, he went back to Washington and he had to go to the top general to explain why these Tuskegee Airmen should stay there. Now let me go off a little bit on a tangent. If I ask you, "Who was the greatest or the number one general of the American army during World War Two?" you would say who?

Interviewer: Patton.

Pouncy: Patton was pretty good, but that one guy who was really in charge of everything. He became president.

Interviewer: Ei—

Pouncy: Eisenhower. That's right. But Eisenhower was not supposed to be in charge. There was a general named Marshall. He was the one that was slated for that job. So this guy Roosevelt, real sneaky, he called Marshall in and said—I think Marshall's name was George, I'm not really sure—he said, "You are qualified, you have paid your due, you're the guy who's supposed to go to Europe and run this thing, but I need you here with me in Washington." And it's said that...Roosevelt said to him, to young Marshall, "What do you think about it, General Marshall?" And young Marshall said, "Mr. President, that's your call." Of course, Marshall didn't go. Marshall stayed. And Marshall was the guy that Captain Davis had to talk to and convince that these are good people, good flyers, good soldiers, they have a right, and they can do the job. And of course, I guess...Captain Davis convinced him, and the 99th stayed, but they were sent to another group. And they did very well in that group. They c—they really...they did very well. History, the movies that you see, can tell you much more about it than I can.

Interviewer: And Davis became the second African-American general after his father?

Pouncy: After his father, yeah.

⁴ The 99th Fighter Squadron flew over North Africa, Sicily, and Italy.

⁵ Throughout his education at West Point, Davis was isolated and often ignored by his peers (*Great Black Heroes*)

Interviewer: So all of these—these young trainees, these guys coming down to Tuskegee from all over the United States, what was the experience for the ones coming from the Northeast, you know, and the West, coming to Alabama for training?

Pouncy: Well, first of all, they—they never quite pronounced Alabama right. [*chuckles*] Somehow, they seemed—I don't know how they said it, but they wouldn't say it right....How can I best say that...the air base is a little city unto itself, so it was a...a different place there, and you just don't compare an army setting with a city setting, so it was all new to us and new to them. Most of the flying instructors were white. The tactical officer, the one who ran the outfit, most of them were black. But...in the Air Corps, or in any highly technical training program, you don't have time to play around. So we didn't have time to play around, we were so busy doing what we had to do, we just didn't have time to—to worry too much about anything else, in my opinion.

Interviewer: Were there any people in the surrounding area...that found it troublesome that there were these young African-Americans coming in to get this training to be pilots, and maybe they—they resisted it in some way, or did you just not notice that at all?

Pouncy: I really...I didn't notice it, and I don't remember it happening. Again, I point out to you that...a—a college setting, there's a college setting, see you here at this college, and you have your own little community, and you come to work here, and you not concerned what happened maybe 2 or 3 miles from here. Well, at Tuskegee, on the campus, it was the same way, and when you went to the base, it was almost the same way. The base would ran—was run—in its own way and...it was a different setting, and what the neighbors thought, or what the community thought, I don't...it was never a problem, as far as I know.

Interviewer: So in the training, were there dangers? Did people...get injured just in the training process?

Pouncy: Were there dangers? Flying is risky. It's always risky. We had a saying that...there were old pilots and there were bold pilots, so you have to be careful. They says, there were never any old, bold pilots. If you're too bold, you never get old.

Interviewer: Was anybody injured? Did anybody—?

Pouncy: We lost people. Flying...flying is risky. I think the Air Force will tell you that they lost a lot of people in training who never went to combat. See...when you are running an airplane, there are many, many things have to go right all the time, and you only need one or two of 'em to go wrong, and you pay a big price for the mistake you make. Flying is not an easy job.

Interviewer: Now, did you train all along to become a pilot?

Pouncy: I started out—I wanted to be a pilot, and I did pretty good. They have primary training, then you have basic training, and you have advanced training. I got through the first two, and in advanced training, I was about ten days from graduation and I...wasn't quite good enough, and I think I was the last one in my class to get washed out, so I didn't quite make it. So after that, I went to bombardier school, but it was a lot of fun, I learned a lot.

Interviewer: And when did you complete training?

Pouncy: I—my f—my pilot class was a class called 44B, that means in 1944, I think it was the second class would have been my class, if things had gone right, I would have graduated in February of 1944, but I didn't, so I went to bombardier school, and I graduated in December as a bombardier for Midland, Texas.

Interviewer: In '44?

Pouncy: In—in December of '44.

Interviewer: Okay. And when did you overseas service c—

Pouncy: I didn't go overseas. Now, one of the reason people talk about Tuskegee Airmen is because they had two battles: they had to fight a military battle, and they had to fight a social battle, and you are probably too young to even know that, okay? But in the bomber group, the social group became the real big battle. We never went to combat. We didn't make it.

Interviewer: Who was holding you back?

Pouncy: Oh my...I think tradition. I think...the social climate...you...it is very hard for you youngsters who are talking to me now to really comprehend how different things were 50 years ago. There's no way for you to know that—I think I can best...explain this by pointing out that after the war's over, I had a job, and I went to a company in Alabama that was run by a farmer and two sons, and I went to visit them to sell our product and the older son and their father were very interested in their business, so I told them what they had to do, and the business was over. Then they had this young son. He kind of reminded me of you a little bit. He was very nosy. So he said to me, "Where'd you go to school?" I pointed out that I went to school in Tuskegee and I went to school in Syracuse. So he looked at me. "Why'd you go all the way up to Syracuse?" I said, "Well, at that time, I wanted to get a doctor's degree and I couldn't go to the University of Alabama. He would seem to be surprised that I wouldn't just go on to the University of Alabama. People forget so quickly, I think that's good. And...he...it just blew his mind that I couldn't go to my school and go on to the University of Alabama and get my doctorate degree. He just couldn't quite

understand that, but I guess he, he eventually...someone maybe told him how things were different in those days.

Interviewer: So your training then ended in December of '44, so did you expect to be able to—to, you know, fly missions in Europe at that time, or was it already apparent that that was not going to be possible for your bombardier group?

Pouncy: The best that we...knew...our group, B-25, was supposed to go in the Pacific, and we were supposed to fly a mission from some island near...Japan onto Japan to the Japan mainland, that's what we were supposed to do. And this thing got so bad, so very bad, that the commander was removed from his command. It got so bad that many of the officers who were being trained to go to fight were court marshalled. The officers felt that the commander was breaking the rules of the...army, so they were arrested, they were court marshalled. And it got so bad until that commander was removed, and then they went to Europe and got Commander Davis, and he came over and he took over. And then...we were...still training and we were no longer gonna be just plain bombardiers or plain navigators. One man was going to do both, be a navigator and a bombardier. So the bombardiers were sent to navigation school, and the navigators were sent to bombardier school so one man could do their job on the plane. My class was in navigation school when the war started, when the bomb was dropped, we were at Louisiana.⁶

Interviewer: So when you say “it got so bad,” what are you talking about?

Pouncy: [*chuckles*] You're so young, so much you don't know. Well...how can I best put this? Most of the personnel were black. Some of the commanders were not black. Some of the trainers were not black. So there's...in the military, we have clubs, officer's club. Off duty, you go to the officer's club and...you have a sandwich or a drink or something or play pool. It's a relaxing place. I imagine you have faculty clubs here. I imagine you do. I imagine you have student clubs, I don't know. But...this commander ended up with two clubs: club number 1 and club number 2, or club number 2 and club number 1, whatever. And those people who looked like me were expected to go to one club and those who looked like someone else were supposed to go to another club. And that's not the way it's supposed to be. Officers are supposed to go to officers clubs, and...when...some of the officers would go to the club that the commander thought they shouldn't go to, they were arrested for going there. And that precipitated the whole thing.

Interviewer: So there were individuals, or groups of soldiers, officers, who challenged the—this situation, the segregating?

Pouncy: Who did what to it? Who challenged it?

⁶ “When the war started”: Pouncy most likely meant when the war ended.

Interviewer: Who challenged it?

Pouncy: You put it very, very, very nicely. “They challenged it.” They did challenge it. And the commander replied to the challenge. “You can’t go there,” arrest you. Eventually...the court marshal or the—I think expunged from the record or something like that, I think that happened. It’s an area that...is still painful for me to talk about, and I really don’t like to talk about it.

Interviewer: So do you regret not being able to...fly any of those missions in the Pacific?

Pouncy: What now?

Interviewer: Do you regret not having the opportunity to fly as a bombardier in the—

Pouncy: Do I regret that? Actually...I think the answer, you have mixed feelings. If you don’t go in harm’s way, you probably won’t get harmed. And when you go to combat, you get it in harm’s way. So the fact that I did not go to combat, well, I never was exposed to combat conditions, so I’m still around, so I don’t regret that. But...what can I say? I have regrets, yeah. Now, after the war’s over, and wars have a way of ending, I came back to school, and I went to graduate school at T—at Syracuse, Syracuse University. And I flew with the New York Air National Guard as a radar observer, and that was a completely different situation. There, I felt that I was a soldier, an airman, an officer, like all the other officers, and I felt much better about it.

Interviewer: And do you think that that had to do with the change in the location?

Pouncy: Had to do with what, now?

Interviewer: The change in location?

Pouncy: Well, this is several years later, now. A lot of things are changing. The...the whole social order of this nation was changing. Now, we sometime get unhappy at the military situation, but you must remember that most military people were civilians and whatever cultures, whatever habits we have as civilians, we bring them into the military, so there isn’t much difference between the way the military think and civilians think. They have on different uniforms. But our nation was changing, so things are quite different now. I would guess that...fifty years ago, no one would have thought of you and I sitting down having an interview like this. So that kind of thing is changing in our nation, and I think changing for the better.

Interviewer: So could you tell me how many—how many total pilots, crewmen and women in the Tuskegee Air Squadron overall.

Pouncy: You know Zellie, our historian, and she can do that better than I can⁷. However, I think the total number of Tuskegee Airmen, out of 16,000, of that number, about 926 I think were pilots, okay? Today, the number of Tuskegee Airmen that are still alive is only around 200.

Interviewer: So do you think their efforts and success, your efforts and success as a Tuskegee Airmen, how do you think that contributed to the Civil Rights struggle that was already taking place and would reach its height the 1960's?

Pouncy: In my opinion, I think it was a great contribution. I think it was the greatest contribution that really started this. You must remember that...as I said before, the Air Force had very high standards, so the Air Force took these black people, these black young men and women, and gave them the most demanding jobs in the whole military, and they did well. So I think when the Civil Rights movement got started...the Air Force, and the young men in the Air Force, had proven to the world that these people are qualified to do any job that any other citizen in America can do. So I think it did help a whole lot, a tremendous amount.

Interviewer: And how have the Tuskegee Airmen been recognized for their service since?

Pouncy: I think the greatest recognition is this Congressional Gold Medal. Have you ever seen it? Have I ever shown it to you? I think when the nation gave that to the Tuskegee Airmen, it was said that was the greatest recognition that they could make, in my own opinion.

Interviewer: And what year was that?

Pouncy: Gee, I don't know. Zellie can tell you these numbers.

Interviewer: 2007, I believe?

Pouncy: What do you say?

Interviewer: 2007.

Pouncy: I think you're right. But one—you asked me some time ago what courses did I like and dislike, and I told you I didn't like sociology and stuff like that, so I don't really know my history. [*chuckles*]

Interviewer: Did you receive the gold medal personally?

Pouncy: No, actually...when the gold medal was given out, I was not very active in the chapter. And when I joined the chapter a few years later, they gave it to me.

⁷ Zellie Rainey Orr

They took a picture of me receiving that medal, so I got mine a few years after the initial.

Interviewer: So, tell me about pursuing your PhD at Syracuse University.⁸ Why did you choose Syracuse, and what was different about going to Syracuse than going to Tuskegee?

Pouncy: Good. [*chuckles*] I...I had to choose a school that would choose me, and I applied to Tusk—applied to Syracuse, and they accepted me. It's just that simple, I...I don't think I had the choice of looking at several schools. I had to try to find a school that would accept me. Syracuse had a little money available and they—I applied and they accepted me.

Interviewer: And what year was that?

Pouncy: I graduated in '58, so took four years, I must have gone there in 1954.

Interviewer: And what was it like living in Syracuse...considering you've grown up in Alabama? So what—how was the social atmosphere different in Syracuse, New York?

Pouncy: Going to graduate school...you don't have much social life. So the social atmosphere was mainly going to school. I...went there...I had a teaching assistantship. And I ended up being a laboratory instructor for all of these kiddies from New Jersey, New York...and there was not a single black kid in my class. There were no black students, no black graduate students in the department. So I was alone there. You...think there are a lot of differences between races, but there are not. When you really get to know people...they're all about the same. They love, they hate. They do mean things to each other, so there's no great difference. So, I—I didn't have a real social problem. I remember once, though, I was getting ready to fly for the New York Air National Guard, and I had to buy a uniform, so I went to a store downtown in Syracuse to buy some khaki pants, and the clerk said, "Khakis are right here," so I went over to look at the khakis, and I didn't quite see what I want, and what I wanted was khakis that had a little flap on the pocket, and so I got the...and I said "This is what I want." He said, "Those are officers' pants." I said, "I *am* an officer." And that seemed to have surprised him, but...I went back to that store, and he and I had become very good friends. He was glad to sell me...pants or anything else I wanted. To tell you that even in those days, or these days, that we only have prejudiced people in the South, that's not true. Prejudice is universal. And after awhile, you find that it becomes the individuals who's prejudiced and not the whole society, and you find people who see you as an individual and...they have that kind of respect for you. On the other hand, they see you as an individual and they have disrespect for you.

⁸ Pouncy earned a PhD in organic chemistry (*Syracuse University: Institute for Veterans and Military Families*).

Interviewer: So was...the PhD program at Syracuse, was it very rigorous? Was it—did—did you excel or was it difficult? What was your experience?

Pouncy: I think graduate programs, especially for the PhD, is very rigorous. It seemed that many schools would make exceptions for the bachelor, they have this kid in college, “Well, he’s okay. Let’s help him out or let’s get him out.” When I went to Syracuse, I had a roommate who had gone to a very good school, and he didn’t do well, and he told me they had to vote him a degree, so they did, they voted him a bachelor’s degree from this very good school. Then he came to Syracuse, and he’s working on his graduate degree, and no one was there to vote for him, and he had to really study like I did.

Interviewer: I see. So...after you completed that degree, tell me about your career, your career path?

Pouncy: I went to work for a company called Union Carbide. This company had a division called the Visking Division, and this division would make skins for skinless wieners. There was a man who noticed that America was buying more and more hot dogs. By the way, do you know how they make hot dogs? They stuff meats into...a casing, something to hold it. And originally, they would use animal intestines for that, so there just weren’t enough animal intestine to make all the hot dogs that America was gonna buy. So this man found a way to make skins out of skinless wieners, out of a...for skinless wieners, and he made them out of cotton linters, okay?

Interviewer: That were edible?

Pouncy: Ah...skin, the cotton is cellulose, cellulose is indigestible. So when they made these nice wieners...you can’t eat the cellulose. So these guys were very good marketers. They said, “Look, we have skinless wieners!” Not because you’re getting something better, but because you couldn’t eat it. And so they used the skin to make the wiener, and then they would take the skin off, and you probably don’t remember anything but skinless wieners.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Pouncy: So I went to work for those people...they, they were very good people. The man who ran that company...took very good care of the people who worked for him. He never fired a single person in that business, and in the off season when they were not selling many hot dogs, they would come to work anyway. And I’ve been told that you would come to work and you would be a skillful machine operator, when you’re not doing anything, and they would say, “Take this broom...and you keep, you sweep this room. But don’t sweep it too fast, because if you get through before quitting time, you have to do it again.” I don’t remember his name. I never met him. But he was a very considerate person.

Interviewer: And...is it true that your job took you to many postings around the world?

Pouncy: Later on...my company was bought out by Union Carbide and we were transferred from the original location in Chicago to New Jersey, and then when I went to New Jersey, I began to travel all over the states, and all over the world, selling our product, not really selling it, showing people how good our product was and how to use it, and it took me to a lot of places: Europe, America, Japan.

Interviewer: And the Middle East?

Pouncy: Actually...the Middle East came to us. And in the Middle East, they came to our place, came to our laboratory, and we talked to them and tell them what we were doing...and someone in the Middle East bought a license from Union Carbide. And they found out that they really didn't know how to do these things, that they weren't learning as fast as they wanted to. And they asked me one day, they said, "When you retire, would you come and work for us?" I said, "Yes." So I retired and three weeks later, I went to work for them in Saudi Arabia. I stayed there...6 years, I guess.

Interviewer: What was that time like?

Pouncy: Hard. [*chuckles*] It's very different, the culture is different, the people are different. The...there's a strong separation of the...men and women. In our plant, in our business, there was not a single woman, no—no women secretaries, no women cooks—nothing but men. So it's quite different. Of course, the religion is different. Christianity is not the religion of choice. The people are the same, they're very nice people. I got to know them, I got to like them. And I stayed there 6 years.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your family?

Pouncy: I had a wife. Her name was Mattie. I met her in college. We stayed married a long time. She passed away about 4 or 5 years ago. She was a teacher. She taught elementary school. She also taught special education, now, if you have any educators around, you know what special education means. She taught special education for several years. She was an excellent teacher. My son teaches in Princeton. My daughter-in-law writes books. My grandson is a marketing person.

Interviewer: And can you tell me about attending his...his commencement ceremony?

Pouncy: Can I tell you about what, now?

Interviewer: Attending his graduation ceremony a couple years ago?

Pouncy: I don't quite understand you.

Interviewer: When he graduated from college—

Pouncy: My son?

Interviewer: Your grandson.

Pouncy: [*chuckles*] Yes, I went there...and...he did graduate, and I was there. My wife wasn't there, she had passed away, but I sat there during that graduation and...I think I was kind of transfixed because my grandson was graduating from one of the best schools in the nation, one of the best schools in the world. I felt very good about that...but he didn't think it was anything very special. He went to school and he graduated. [*chuckles*] Things are different now, for the better.

Interviewer: Thank you, Dr. Pouncy.