

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series
Theodore Britton, Jr. interview
Conducted by James Newberry
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Transcribed by Jessica Bauder

Theodore Britton was born on October 17th, 1925 in North August, South Carolina. He lived there until his family moved to New York City for his father's job when he was ten years old. Britton had many afterschool jobs and worked as a shoe shiner to help his family in addition to being an avid learner. When African Americans were finally allowed to enter the Marine Corps, he was one of the first men to serve. Traveling with the Marine Corps increased his appetite for learning and he continued to pursue an education after the end of World War II at NYU. Britton was later appointed to Ambassador of Barbados where he continued traveling. Later in life he developed a real appreciation for the Marine Corps and the opportunities it presented. Today, he has five adult children and lives in Atlanta.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: This is James Newberry. I'm here with the honorable Theodore Britton Jr. on Friday December 12th, 2014 at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University.

Britton: You realize there's a Roosevelt in there too. [laughs]

Interviewer: I do and I'm gonna have you state your full name shortly. Umm, Ambassador Britton do you agree to this interview?

Britton: Yes sir.

Interviewer: Would you please state your full name?

Britton: Theodore Roosevelt Britton Jr.

Interviewer: Could you tell me when and where were you born?

Britton: North Augusta, South Carolina. That's in Aiken County, South Carolina mm-hmm.

Interviewer: And what's your birthday?

Britton: October 17, 1925.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

Britton: Theodore Roosevelt Britton Sr. and my mother's name was Bessie Bell Cook. C-O-O-K, yeah mm-hmm.

Interviewer: What did your parents do for a living?

Britton: My father was sort of a general laborer and my mother was, umm, she started first as a house worker and later she became in the-- in the sort of a manufacturing plant, yeah.

Interviewer: And that was in North Augusta?

Britton: No that was in New York. I left North August when I was ten years old, yeah, it was at this place where she worked was called the trade bindery, which meant that it was, you know, it was concerned with books, binding books, yeah.

Interviewer: So, why did your family move to New York?

Britton: My father was induced to come up by his younger brother who found a job for him in New York. Umm, this was during the Depression during 1935. So, he went up to take a job in the railroad, not the railroad, the subway system being built in New York. Umm, of course a year later we came up the p- the recession hit and he lost that job, yeah mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Where did you live in New York?

Britton: We started in Harlem, 126th Street and after about three months when he lost his job we had to move down to 62nd Street which is in mid-Manhattan just a few blocks off Columbus Circle, mm-hmm.

Interviewer: So how did life for your family change moving from the South to New York?

Britton: Well obviously from a little hamlet, which was called blue heaven, into New York which is a big city, umm, I don't there that there was a great impact made on us at the 126th Street in Harlem but umm downtown was a much greater thing. There's so many more facilities down there. Plus, it was very close to Central Park, umm, and those are the kinds of things that were useful. Of course that was a new school system, and I have to tell you quickly that although I was in the seventh grade when I came from the South and I was ten years old, in Harlem they decided that children from the South weren't as smart as those from the North so they put me back three years. This is in the Harlem school system, which was primarily black. But when I moved down, down further into Manhattan, which was an all-white school system, they loved me and I made rapid progress gaining back those years.

Interviewer: How do you account for that?

Britton: Umm, course if I were religious, I would say that the Lord takes care of his own, but in this case they just seemed to have a great affection for me and teachers treated me special. My, I have a cousin who was in one of my classes and she said that, umm, they, all of the students, always noted that I got preferential treatment. Now, it wasn't just because they liked me. One teacher I remember so well telling me, and I must've been about 11 or 12, to buy myself some AT&T stock. AT&T stock, now why she'd be telling me this I don't know, but umm then I had other

tips. For example, one teacher said, “now, as you begin to finish elementary school and you go to high school take a general course, not vocational or anything, because you never know you might be able to go to college.” And later on ‘cause the G.I. Bill took care of that, I was able to go to college but because these teachers had such a solicitors feeling towards me they gave me all kinds of - - even in high school now. My teacher, an official teacher, had studied under Woodrow Wilson. He was Phi Beta Kappa, graduate of Princeton University, from day one he said, “Britton, I want you to be a gentleman and scholar.” He never asked me what I wanted to be, but he told me what he wanted me to be, a gentle-- I don’t think I even knew what the words meant. But this was the kind of treatment that I got and gosh I’m so blessed that I was treated this way and looked after this way because for three and a half years that I was in class under him I always got this kind of special treatment so I was very fortunate. Now my parents had only gone to about third grade and for a little bit of history, Julius Rosenwald, the former chairman president of Sears Roebucks, had something like 5,000 schools built out of his own, using his own money and I went to one of those one room school houses. There were four rows; first grade, second grade, third grade, and fourth grade. The teacher probably did not go more than high school. Most of the older people that I remember in the old days generally had gone to about the third or fourth grade because once they left these one room schoolhouses quite often there was nothing for them to, you know, gravitate towards. But umm, as I said, I was fortunate we lived in a little hamlet and it meant walking several miles to get to the other school but after I finished the first- the fourth- grade why-umm I went to this other school and umm that was how I got my early schooling. My parents, as I said, only had about a third grade education so I was extremely fortunate that to have this man come into my life and be almost like a surrogate parent to help me, you know, move ahead in life and so forth.

Interviewer: So how did your parents sort of view your scholastic achievements and your, you know, appetite for education?

Britton: They were very proud of me. As you see I – because we - when we first arrived in umm in New York City and after that fiasco with his job and what have you, we became the janitor of this building but later on we had to take in what they call home relief in those days is now called welfare but it was home relief for a while but I decided almost immediately that I’d never have to depend on my parents or anybody else for my sustenance and so I became a shoeshine boy immediately and I was making so much money that I was helping my parents in short order, but that started me off to being very aggressive, enterprising and even in high school I had one job before school and three jobs after school. So, I was always, I was always in the chips and I never had, never have had to ask my parents or anybody else for anything else.

Interviewer: Where did you work as a shoeshine boy?

Britton: Up and down – well first on the west side because we were right near the docks. We had the Cunard line, the British French line, German line, Swedish line, the Italian line and when they – people would come in and you know both the passenger as well as the sailors they always wanted shoe shines and I did good, I did good. But on Sundays quite often I'd be on Broadway, but uh, I did okay.

Interviewer: So Broadway would've been maybe less touristy at that point?

Britton: Well that's why you got more people on Sunday. Uhh-No, Broadway was still touristy, oh yes, it's always been there because, let's see, we were, we were just north of you might say Tin Pan Alley and, umm, between Tin Pan Alley and Central Park it was quite busy, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: With all of these jobs you had before and after school did you have time for hobbies, for going to the theater, for doing you know general things for your entertainment, for fun?

Britton: Listening to the radio that was principally it and I still do it and I was a boy scout for a while and what else? I played the bugle and that was basically it. I tend to be a little bit more studious, not necessarily bright or anything but very studious and umm it, it kind of supported me going along, yeah, yeah. I'm still – sometimes I cannot remember things so well.

Interviewer: Do you just have a good memory?

Britton: I would think that I fit it because I also keep notebooks and like today we're talking and so I'll make a note in my notebook that I met you and Phil and you know who did the interview and whatever, it was up and KC – KSU – so all of these things. By the way writing reinforces memory. I always say that it's not only the fact that you get it up here [motions to head], but you're seeing here [motions to eyes], you're feeling it here [holds out hands], and you're sensing it here [motions to ears]. All of those just add to your memory.

Interviewer: You said your family moved away from Harlem but could you talk to me a little bit about Harlem in those days and life there, culture in Harlem, the Renaissance there during the 20s and the 30s?

Britton: Only what I've read of since then because I don't think that it registered too much with me umm I knew – I'd read some things about it, Langston Hughes and some of the writers of the time, Richard Wright and what have you, but it didn't really register that much with me because when I came south – to the middle, I mean mid-Manhattan that had a great deal more emphasis on my mind because you see I was grew up in a system that was segregated so it was all black – African-American I should say – and coming into Harlem was sort of repetition of the same so I took it for granted. But when I moved south, I mean moved to Lower Manhattan, it was a different kind of thing there were so many more things. For example, I discovered the American Museum of Natural History then I discovered

the Museum of the City of New York and the Metropolitan Museum and then there were places where they offered evening recreation. The – one of the companies – Pepsi-Cola Company had that teen mobile and they would have programs and so forth so, plus I discovered the library now I had never set foot in a library until I arrived in New York and was about, you know, going on about 11 years old so this was something new and the idea of being able to get in and read books, you know, and take books out it was something new. That really made an impression on me yeah —.

Interviewer: Did you have siblings?

Britton: Two, yeah, an older sister and a younger sister. By the way I'll say that in the south there was a gentleman who was the insurance man. We called him Debit, debit collectors. I became president of a life insurance company later on in life and one of the things that'd he'd come around monthly to collect the insurance. This gentleman, for some reason and I don't know how it came about, offered to pay me a nickel for spelling a big word when he came around. So at the age of 8 or 9, 8 years or something words like Baluchitherium, which is a prehistoric elephant. I knew those words because I've always looked at, if not big words, you know long words at least those were new to me, esoteric words or that kind of business I just kind of digested them. I just returned from a three days retreat with a group of P-uh, M.D.s, PhDs, and some time combination of M.D./PhD on the subjects of prostate cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular, violence prevention, and obesity. These people were speaking words that'll run you to the dictionary, the encyclopedia, the thesaurus, google and you name it. But I just ate it up because this is—when I went overseas the first time in the Marine Corps I roomed with medical corpsmen, four of them, and when they started using words like acetylsalicylic acid they had me, they had me, I mean that's aspirin you know that. But they—I just learned so much with them but then it whet my appetite for more and I— well, you know, when you sound intelligent people actually think that you are intelligent so— [laughs]

Interviewer: –Fooling them

Britton: I have a mountain of words. But I was blessed that that gentleman started me off on this business of being addicted to words. Another one who was a distant cousin came in one day and he mentioned that he had been to Africa, he was in the Merchant Marine. And I said, “Africa? Where's that?” and that got me started to wanting to go to these other places. I've done about, I'd say about 166 countries and I learn something from each and every one. 49 of the 50 states and I've worked in many of them too.

Interviewer: Which state haven't you been to?

Britton: North Dakota. I've looked over into North Dakota standing in South Dakota and in Montana but I just didn't —.

Interviewer: You'll leave that one alone?

Britton: I just didn't get there.

Interviewer: Well let's go back to your teenage years. At what point did you become aware of the rumblings of war in Europe and possibly America's impending role in that war?

Britton: Let's see by this time I was – we had moved on to 52nd Street from 62nd Street and um, I noted there was beginning to have some, some more concerns. I knew quite a bit about the lend-lease program, you know, in high school we started talking about different things and Africa as a matter of fact. One of the fellas wanted to go back to Africa and set up a great African Empire. Of course, he didn't ask the Africans what they thought about this. Anyway um, I was aware of it and I began to be aware that I was following, I read an awful lot. So I was aware what was happening with the Sudetenland, the difficulties in Czechoslovakia, Hitler and Chamberlain's agreement and when chamberlain came back and he said, you know, "peace is at hand" or something like that. I hope I'm not stealing words from Henry Kissinger. But I was aware that something was going on and by the– conversation later on with Queen Elizabeth we talked about the fact that the war had interrupted some number of things. We had a World's Fair going on so it was sort of a little ominous rumbling and I remember sitting at home on Sunday afternoon when I heard of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. So I was aware. Ultimately, I ended up doing a little stint in a war factory. This goes back to 1943. Was it '43? Yes, it was in '43.

Interviewer: Well now where were you when you heard that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor?

Britton: New York, 52nd Street.

Interviewer: At home?

Britton: Yes, mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Okay and what did that signal to you personally? What did you think was coming?

Britton: Well obviously the very next day the President was on and said that a state of war exists. He didn't ask that they declare war he said a state of war exists because by that time, you know, everyone was aware, pictures were beginning to come in of Pearl Harbor and so forth and we quickly became aware that it was a war on and about a year later of course, since my ears were tuned to things especially civil rights things that was when President Roosevelt issued the executive order opening up the war effort to women, minorities and so forth as well as emphasis that everyone had to get involved in the war effort. In addition, I would say too that one of my jobs was with a cleaner and these people were very active, I think,

in the Communist Party at that time, it was the cleaners in New York. And I do remember that I was invited to some of the programs they had at Madison Square Garden. I remember a certain crew – a certain battleship – not a battleship, it might've been a smaller craft it was called the Reuben James, the USS Reuben James. It had been sunk, [pause] I think it had been, yeah. But I remember seeing something that had been composed by Arlo Guthrie, I mean yeah, that may be a son– but by Guth–Woody Guthrie, yeah. “What were their names on the good Reuben James?” I remember that song so well. I didn't realize that I could've gotten myself kind of caught up in something that the McCarthy years would've, you know–.

Interviewer: Would've come back to bite you.

Britton: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Umm so the Marine Corps being one of the last branches to deseg – not to desegregate – but to open up to African-Americans–

Britton: Did you say one of the last branches?

Interviewer: The last?

Britton: The last branch yes, yes.

Interviewer: Okay, so when were you drafted then?

Britton: Uh let's see, January 1944. I was called down and originally I'd been thinking about the Air Corps, you know I like to fly, but for some reason at the last minute I said ‘No, I think I'll take the Marine Corps. Cause originally, when I finished the exam they said well, “you're good, you're in” and they said “which is it going to be; the Army or the Navy?” and I said, “neither.” Well in New York at the time, you go against the grain you're considered a wise guy and they said, “well, only the Army and the Navy are available to you” and I said, “well, I want the Marine Corps.” And along came a gentleman, I always remember his name, Sgt. Mortier, a gunnery sergeant, he came past and he said, “well, let me see what I can do.” And he came back awhile later and said, “you're in.” Now I didn't know that much about the Marine Corps except that it'd begun to, you know, take in African-Americans and that was– the first one arrived August 26th 1942.

Interviewer: So had you graduated from high school?

Britton: No, no, no. They gave me a diploma in absentia the following June. My mother collected it for me. By that time, June, I was just about to go overseas, yeah.

Interviewer: And can you tell me a little bit more about why you decided to join the Marine Corps? Was there any– what was the motivation?

Britton: I don't think I had a formal thought about it expect that umm it was new and I wanted to do it and sometimes I thought about the fact that my father must've had

a little pioneer spirit. Now, keep in mind that he left the family to go up north, which is totally new to him and so he sort of has a little pioneer spirit about him and maybe I was following that same—without even thinking about it. So the Marine Corps was a new branch pioneer and so I wanted to go in that.

Interviewer: Well can you talk to me a little bit about resistance to black men joining the Marine Corps both within the institution of the Marine Corps and out, public resistance.

Britton: Yes, yes, the Commandant at that time was a man named Thomas Holcomb, he was a Lieutenant General. He was the last Lieutenant General to serve as Commandant of the Marine Corps. At one point he was quoted as saying given the choice between 5,000 whites or 250,000 blacks he would take the 5,000 whites because he didn't think that blacks could fight. Maybe I shouldn't say, you know, fight as such [makes a fist] but that we couldn't master instruments and all that, the weapons and all that kind of business. And needless to say the President said, "you will take them." It took a long time because the President's executive order was in 1941 and the first black marine arrived at the post was, um, 1942 August, 26th. Even then they were not really prepared because they decided that we would not go to Parris Island on the east coast or Camp Pendleton on the West coast, but they'd build a separate, segregated unit for us. I say segregated with tongue in cheek because our original noncommissioned officers were all white, the officers were all white, and many of the troops were black, I mean all the troops were black. The enlisted men except for the young white— so we were integrated and it was the other camp that was segregated. They were all white. But, you know, and interestingly they—we began to be put to the test now. Originally they had just one organization, the 51st Defense Battalion and it was planned just to have one battalion – defense battalion. As a matter of fact, the story goes that Colonel Wood, Samuel A. Wood, who was a commanding officer had to name it because it had no name other than the defense battalion, you know, with the colored troops. He was talking with some of the fellas one day and he had to pull out his wallet and so he pulled out a five-dollar bill and a one-dollar bill. The five-dollar bill had Lincoln on it and the one-dollar bill had Washington and he decided he would name it the 51st Defense Battalion, yeah. Lincoln symbolized freedom for African-Americans, Washington symbolized freedom for the entire country so that's how it got started. [laughs] yeah. yeah. But there was a regulation by the way that no colored person would ever be in charge of a white person. And so it's as if an African-American had six stripes and the other person had one stripe he would be in charge and some others were quoted as saying they were afraid of us they didn't know how to handle us I mean you're fellow citizens, fellow citizens of their country and they're afraid of us? Gosh, well it changed. That Commandant asked to be retired after let's see I think it was in 19— it would be just about the middle of 1944 and uh – the beginning of 1944. By this time Lieutenant General Vandegrift had been the hero in Guadalcanal, the first

victory of the war for the Marines. So he was nominated then as a Commandant and he became the first four star general to be Commandant. The former Commandant retired and a little later he was made the minister to South Africa. Again, we weren't up to having everybody as an ambassador, he was the Minister to South Africa.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Britton: But that got it started. And by the way, the 51st was called upon to do a test out there, they had targets being trailed by – trailing planes – and the guys got on the range and blasted everything out of the sky and they didn't miss anything and I think it was one of the commanding generals looked at the Commandant and said, "I think they're ready." Well when you're firing like that you're more than just ready, but unfortunately when we went out to the Pacific the outfit was broken up and spread around in pieces. In fact, some of their best equipment was taken by the other defense battalion which was white, it was already out there. And so we began to miss a lot of the combat thing. For a while many of us were a little bit upset over the fact that we weren't getting into the fight like everybody else. As we've gotten a little bit older we say well it wasn't the worst thing in the world. We could've gotten our butts killed out there, you know, so– but in fact what was tragic is I look back and think of it we, the black troops, black troops, were put in depot companies which was supply companies and ammunition supply companies. Okay, this meant that men who had fired expert on the rifle range were supplying ammunition to fellas who probably didn't, in some cases, even qualify on the rifle range. So many of these fellas, young white fellas, lost their lives doing things that should've been done by their fellow citizens who had been denied doing that because they were colored, they're black, you know.

Interviewer: Well can you tell me about arriving at Montford Point and what you found there?

Britton: Montford Point. Coming in, of course these were very, very wooden huts and so forth. That was formerly a CCC camp but I don't know if you remember that name, Civilian Conservation Corps, yes, and because they had purchased land, taken land, expropriated land from the people to build this camp. So it was kinda rustic but you know I had never lived in anything that was so–so, well nothing that was certainly pompous or anything like that. In the South it was a three-bedroom house, you know, we called them shotgun houses and um outhouse in the back there. So, we had this kind of thing and that was it. Training was a little bit rough because in North Carolina in the morning it's very chilly, very cold and by the middle of the day it's very hot. But I had a sort of philosophy that I was gonna stay out there as long as anybody else was. I was not one of the big guys, I was about 5'8 and so forth but I said well even the drill instructor would have to go inside at some point and sometimes we would– we would be given an exercise with carrying a locker box overhead and squatting, we call it duck walking, and I would say to myself that I'd be the last one to go down. If guys had to faint or

something let them faint, I'd still be going there holding up and I would be the last one to get out of there. So, I never assumed that anything was too difficult for me and even when we went overseas I said, well if a thousand of us go into battle and only one can come out I would feel sorry for the other 999. But I will say this, in addition, going overseas was like a real education to me. It was almost like a college degree. We had the US Armed Forces Institute sending books on a regular basis. As I said plus rooming with these medical corpsmen I learned so much from them and with these books you could name it there were geology, psychology, English, literature and so forth so I had a good opportunity to read and my officers were very supportive, some of them were from the South but regards to location, again I don't know why but they just tolerated me, supported me and if I had questions, they were all college graduates, if I had questions they didn't hesitate for a moment to sit down with me and explain everything or to go over something whether it was mathematics or— and they also had a joke with these Eisenhower jackets with the buttons invariably I would carry a book in it and so if they, and I always took a place on the back row, if they took too long up on the front row I would start reading in the back row. [laughs] So sometimes they'd come along and tap me on the chest to see if I had a book in there which I usually did because it was really an opportunity to learn and I started listening to things about the formation of the United Nations. I had read a little bit about Ralph Bunche and his work with the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission. And gradually the word diplomacy began to be part of my psyche.

Interviewer: So that was very early then because—

Britton: Absolutely yes, yes. I was able to meet Harry, Harold Stenson, he was the youngest person to sign the United Nations Charter. At that time I think he was a commander in the Navy and he had been Governor of Minnesota. I think he was 34, 35 when he became Governor of Minnesota and he was the youngest person as I said to sign it. He was assistant to Cordell Hull and later on Edward R. Stettinius, the two Secretaries of State.

Interviewer: So how long were you at Montford Point, how long was your training?

Britton: From January 29th to July 3rd, that's when I boarded ship in Norfolk. This training lasted about three months and I think I went to School's Company to learn how to administer a company, you know, as a clerk.

Interviewer: Did you go on furlough before you shipped out?

Britton: I believe so, yes. Funny thing that's a little fuzzy in my mind, but I do remember and I think I went up north with some fellas and that was the first time — something was funny too. And my — that three months — we were called boots and boots have to run everywhere they go- so one day I met him at about 2 months. I had been in the Marine Corps about two months and I had gone to lunch and coming back who should I see but one of my fellow students from high school.

He was now a drill instructor. When I saw him I couldn't yell loud enough, you know, "George, George, George!" and he took one look at me and stiffened. "That boot, that's not the way you address an officer. Stand at attention" and I stood at attention and he gave me, he read the riot act to me in terms of how to—and don't ever speak to him like that again. Well, when he dismissed me I ran off back to my cabin, certain that I'd never speak to him again in life. Needless to say about a day or two after I finished boot camp, by this time I'm walking down the camp with my hands in my pockets I mean I was there, I was no longer a boot. Who should come up but this George Sempa? And he came up "Ted!" and I said "don't speak to me like that" [laughing] I wouldn't have anything to do with him.

Interviewer: How'd he react to that?

Britton: He told me listen, "you were a boot now you're a graduate, you're one of us." That was it, yeah. Yeah, so we got to be friends in fact his son lives in Atlanta now and we're good friends, yeah. Yeah, unfortunately George died he was – he became a toll booth attendant out on the Tri-borough Bridge in New York. That's now called the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge. But he became – he was there and I'd often see him and gosh no matter whether I was four cars away or right up – you know, he was always "Hey Ted!" just like that, yeah.

Interviewer: So, you said you shipped out from Norfolk, when was that?

Britton: July 3rd 1944 on the US ATC Perch - US Army Transport C perch.

Interviewer: And what was the round?

Britton: It took us 33 days. We went from Norfolk to the Panama Canal Zone, Cristóbal, and Colón, and Panama City I think it was, yeah.

Interviewer: And where did you dock first?

Britton: First at Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides and from there up to Domo Cove in Guadalcanal in British Solomon Islands.

Interviewer: And what did you find upon arriving at Guadalcanal?

Britton: It was interesting we had to start building things because you know they didn't prepare for us. Um, one of the first things after we got our tents set up was to build a latrine. The sergeant in charge had ordered us up there to dig a latrine and start building. It was on a hillside. About three months later the umm, what do you call it? The monsoon season began. Waters began pouring down the hill, flooding the latrine causing it to start flowing down towards our camp and so at midnight there the sergeant suddenly yelled for us to fall out with our buckets and our shovels, we all had a bucket and shovel. It was dark, I couldn't even see him and I often think that I remember all of these great sayings out of World War II where MacArthur says "I shall return" and Churchill says, "blood, sweat, and tears" but I always remember this sergeant yelling out "hurry men, dig faster, it's

gaining on us!” and he didn’t say “*it’s*” gaining on us either. [laughs] There have been times when I’ve thought about that. I’ve looked at life and said “boy, sometimes it looks as if the life’s gaining on me” but I’m still here so what can I say. But umm we set up and I would say the most exciting thing after that was a ship, an ammunition ship, exploded a short distance from us on another island, the island of Banika, in the Russell Islands and debris was being held – was being hurled throughout, you know, overhead and falling and what have you. I met – I’ve seen the monument in Washington D.C. in Arlington Cemetery. They took all the remains they could find and put them in this mass grave. It’s called the, yeah, it’s when this plane – this ship blew up and one of my colleagues from Guadalcanal I ran into later and he said he had one day been entering a hotel and he saw this fella in a wheelchair and this fella mentioned something about Guadalcanal and he said, “were you in Benika in the Russell Islands?” and he said, “yes” he said, “that’s where I got hurt” and he said, “well I was on Guadalcanal and I remember what happened down there.” It turned out this fella had been in the, in the hospital I think about six or seven years because he had lost his limbs and he said he had been asleep in the bottom of their ship when he went up and he found himself later on holding on to some kind of wooden plank, you know, in the waters and he said from that point on he didn’t know what happened but he was in the hospital for ages, ages. That was one of the things that came close, I didn’t see anything else that was close. And that wasn’t Japanese action it was, it was the way the ammunition was treated. We didn’t have quite as much of a sense of safety in those days. Umm it’s a tragedy that during World War II a number of the fellas – especially the African-Americans were assigned to ammunition duty and um there were several if not serious explosions up at, I think, up at the great lakes in Chicago and at one time the fellas refused to handle it because of the safety were so absent and they were court martialed. I think ultimately the military reversed the court martials, this was the Navy, but um it also happened out at San Francisco. But our sense of safety and handling ammunitions was very absent. It was something that we, you know, it was one of those regrettable things now some people would say, you go ahead and do the job because the job has to be done, but you don’t have to kill yourself or kill your fellow men in doing something that’s your job, you know. There’s an old German phrase “too soon we get old and too late smart,” ‘cause Churchill again, my favorites, says that “Americans will always do the right thing but only after they’ve tried everything else.” yeah, yeah. So, we improved, yeah.

Interviewer: You said on Guadalcanal that was among the most glorious months of your life–

Britton: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: –with reading these books and things, what were your day to day tasks though, as a Marine?

Britton: Clerical, yeah I had to do the— what you call the monthly muster roll of officers and enlisted men. You had to remember their name, serial number, their rank, what happened to them during the month or nothing if nothing happened and this had to be done perfectly if you made a mistake you had to start over. And that was one of the reasons, one of the things that added to my memory because I— we had about 450 or so men and I got to know all of their full names plus sometimes their date of birth, their serial numbers, anything about them and so forth and years later I would call say one of my fellow Marines like my first sergeant he had an unusual middle name, Zelzah, Z-E-L-Z-A-H. And when I called and asked for Louis Zelzah Murchison he said, “only one person on this earth knows my darn middle name.” [laughs] Another one his name was Rudolph Esthus Johnson, E-S-T-H-U-S. And needless to say if I called him and asked for him he knew exactly who it was without even hearing the voice, yeah. But others had unusual names, but because I had to remember their middle names it meant that I was always special because I – but having memorizes gave me one more up thing in terms of training my memory, it was a repetition over the years that I was there.

Interviewer: So were you randomly assigned that job or were you specifically given that job because of your—

Britton: Keep in mind that I’d gone to School’s Company, the School’s Company, and by the way I um, the gentleman who was in charge of the School’s Company was the second black sergeant major in the Marine Corps. The one gentlemen will be 100 years on January 4th, yeah he lives in Daytona Beach. He’s a distinguished educator and councilman and commissioner.

Interviewer: What’s his name?

Britton: James E. Huger Sr. I’ll be – have to do something for him for his birthday. The last time he celebrated he was 97. The Commandant sent him a special letter, sent me a special letter, to deliver to him on his – at his birthday. And by the way I can’t say too much about that Commandant James Amos, James F. Amos, yeah. He’s now retired, he retired on my birthday. I got a letter from him dated there on the day of my birthday. I wish I had it in my hand I would just read it because it was so meaningful.

Interviewer: Is he the current Commandant of the Marine Corps?

Britton: He’s not the current Commandant. That name is James, um, Joseph F. Dunford but the retired Commandant was James F. Amos. Yeah and he sent the letter on January – on October 17th congratulating me on my birth – my 89th birthday but in addition he was thanking me for coming up to witness his retirement and he also went on to say that he wanted to thank me on the behalf of the American people for being – for my service to the nation and to our Marine Corps and he just went on like that. I’m thinking our year is October 17th James – General Amos has just completed 44 years of military service including 4 years in the Navy and 40 in the

Marine Corps plus he's stepping down as Commandant, the most important position he's held in life and his letter to me is dated the 17th, the same day. 'Course I can tell you this I was sitting in the stand behind the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of Defense and General and Mrs. Amos were suddenly announced and it was a very solemn moment. I always think that he had a certain look of anguish as he came out because this was the end of everything, you know, in the military for him and as they came out Mrs. Amos spotted me, we call her Bonnie. She spotted me and suddenly looked up and yelled "Happy Birthday Mr. Ambassador!" and threw me a kiss and I imagine there must've been a thousand people wondering who in the hell is this Ambassador she's talking about? But you know, that's the kind of relationship we've had—

Interviewer: Built up over the years?

Britton: and it's the relationship of a Commandant and to a former buck sergeant. Now because I became Ambassador my equivalent rank in U.S. government protocol is four stars, but he's been more than that. He's been — it's been a personal affection because he was the one who really went out of his way to make sure we — get all of his efforts to make sure that we got this Congressional Gold Medal [touches medal] for our services in World War II and I haven't gone through the sort of indignities of being segregated, denied promotions and so forth. By the way at this retirement ceremony were black officers who had reached the rank of Lieutenant General. I think I'm the only one there who had the equivalent of four stars, yeah.

Interviewer: So let's go back to the Pacific. When did you ship out of Guadalcanal? Where did you go from there?

Britton: April 11th 1945 and we went up to Pearl Harbor. While we were at sea President Roosevelt died, yes. And we went to Pearl Harbor stayed overnight and from there went to Maui where we stayed at a camp. We named it, it was named Camp Paukukalo. I might say that while in Guadalcanal I met a young man, his name was Matthew Bella and when I— about maybe 5 or 6 — 5 years ago I was in Korea. It was a meeting of group of people under Reverend Moon's groups and um these three gentlemen were walking down the hallway and I looked at them and I said "you're not African. You're not Polynesian, you're Melanesian aren't you?" and they said "yes" and I said "And that means you're probably from the Pacific but are you from the Solomon Islands?" and they said "yes" and I said "Guadalcanal?" and they said "yes." So with that I said "Now Henderson, Tenaro, or Domo Cove?" and one said "I'm the mayor of Domo." Well then I asked, "What ever happened to Matthew Bella?" and they said "He was our most revered elder statesmen. He died two years ago." Well I need to say these gentlemen who had suddenly met someone who knew about Guadalcanal, Domo Cove, Tenaro, you know, it just seemed to mean so much to them. I gained some real friends that

day. But I was sorry to hear of young Matthew Bella's – we were about the same age.

Interviewer: So, were you ever on Saipan?

Britton: Never.

Interviewer: Okay, so from Guadalcanal you returned to Hawai'i?

Britton: Not returned, I went to Hawai'i for the first time ever, yes.

Interviewer: So the war – this was April of '45 you said?

Britton: April '45 [nods head].

Interviewer: So, the war's not over yet in the Pacific but you're going to Hawai'i?

Britton: That's right the invasion had taken place in Europe but we were preparing for Japan except came August the 6th 1945 that's when the bomb landed on Hiroshima which I visited several times by the way.

Interviewer: Well why had they shipped you back to Hawai'i?

Britton: To stage for Japan

Interviewer: Okay.

Britton: The action in Guadalcanal was over except for some clean up. In fact, there are now young people forming groups to go into Guadalcanal and look for remains of their ancestors – Japanese men – who were killed there but who were never repatriated, their bones never picked up and so forth. It's something like 30,000 Japanese were killed on that island, yeah.

Interviewer: So, do you have more recollection of hearing that FDR had died? What was the – you were on ship and that point and what was sort of the mood on board?

Britton: I am not certain that um, that there was any great change except that we were sorry because Franklin D. Roosevelt had meant something special to us. He, course he was like the father, keep in mind in from 1932 and here we are talking about 11 years later with the average age of us being around 19 or 20 that meant that we were really kids. Almost like tots or something when we first knew of his name. In fact, he might've been a bigger name even before that. But it was something entirely new it wasn't, well we knew him as sort a father figure we didn't, I don't think we attached a great deal of feelings about it. It's only in later years that we realized that, you know, the executive order made it possible for us to become Marines again. By the way prior to World War II, the Revolution, during the Revolution there were Africans in the Marine Corps but it was not a U.S. Marine Corps as such because the U.S. had not been founded as a country. It was a Continental Congress prior to that, it's only later on in 1789 when the country formally began to come together as such just by the day of independence

the stipulations informing the country were that African-Americans, African people, would not be welcome in the Marine Corps or the Navy for that matter. Later on the Navy began to take African people in but only as servants, you know, the mess men and what have you. In fact, one of the first heroes of World War II was a man named Dorie Miller, a mess man, who was reported to have shot down 4 or 5 Japanese planes. As it happens he was an assistant – what do you call it? – an attendant to the captain. And the Captain had been wounded on his ship in the first onslaught by the Japanese so he was told to watch over the Captain. The Captain died so he – by this time had gotten the Captain into his cabin and he had nothing to do. In fact at that at that point African-Americans were forbidden from firing the weapons on any of the battleships, but with nothing better to do he had been given training although it was not – it was against– He decided he'd go ahead and fire at one of the planes – one of the, I think it was a machine gun and he shot down about 4 or 5 of the Japanese planes. Interestingly, I think 25 of the whites received the Medal of Honor including, I think about 10 of them who had been killed in the first onslaught. I mean they didn't do anything other than die, and yet this man was mentioned, given honorable mention, as an unidentified Negro mess man. Now he had been the heavy weight boxing champion of the Pacific, but he was listed as an unidentified Negro mess man. Well then there was a great outcry from the Negro press, God bless 'em, and so they finally recognized him and gave him the Navy Cross which is, I don't think it's the highest, the next one – the top would be the Medal of Honor which the 25 men got, other men got. And then the Navy, I don't remember, there was a Navy Star or something like that. But anyway, he received the Navy Cross and later on lost his life on another ship, it was sunk by the Japanese. Interestingly the, I think it was the Clinton Administration, that upgraded it to a Medal of Honor. There was a – during World War II not one American, African-American, received the Medal of Honor even though, I mean you've heard of the Tuskegee Airmen, I think one man shot down about 5 planes. And they were the first ones by the way, as far as I know, to engage the Germans when they came out with their jet planes but they were more skilled than the Germans in terms of flying so these little planes' propellers were able to shoot down these jet planes, yeah. But this happened on so many other occasions. The 761st Tank Battalion over in Europe had – they just didn't want African-Americans to go into battle against whites. There was a certain white supremacy, racist thing that must've existed almost 100 years from about – I guess about the later part of the 18th – the 19th century to the middle part of the 2nd century [probably means 20th century]. It was just in the nature of things. Apparently, the military said that we couldn't fight. At the same time, I think the basic thing was they did not want to have black men killing white men with the government's permission because there was approximately, I can't remember the exact number but a large number of black troops received the Medal of Honor during the Civil War. In fact, there's one man who received, I think his name was Carney, received two Medals of Honor and plus, even in the –

what was it? – in the Spanish-American War a number of them received the Medal of Honor for bravery. So it was a phony thing – getting back to the 671st Tank Battalion, they had been kept in the States going from place to place learning maneuvers. They maneuvered on ice, snow, grass, mud, and so forth. So finally as the war really became intense in '44 they were sent abroad. Patton was involved in the Battle of the Bulge, you know Bastogne and all that, [inaudible] and these men were suddenly poured into battle well our regular – our white troops – had been trained for only a very quick basis, 3 or 4 months or so and the idea of these heavy tanks getting on ice was not easy for them, but the black troops had been trained on all of that for two years so they had no problem what so ever. In fact, they went so fast they out ran the rest of the Army and they were already in Germany waiting for the rest of the Army to catch up. But believe me none of them got any high medals of recognition and so forth. It's been changed, it's been changed and that's a glory, the beauties of this country and I always say that Churchill used to say "Americans will always do the right thing, but only after they've screwed everything else up" [laughs] and I'm one of them too, you know.

Interviewer: So where were you when the atomic bombs were dropped?

Britton: In Hawai'i. In Maui, Hawai'i.

Interviewer: And what do you remember of that? Did you think the war would be over after the first one?

Britton: I don't think that I gave that much significance to it, you know, it was just another bomb we did not get any of the details of it. It was only somewhat later on when we saw the Emperor coming on and giving his order – not his order but his request to the Japanese people to cease resisting and sometime after that some of our men began to continue on into Japan and into China and so forth. And that's when we began to get some of the reports back. One of my friends from my days on 52nd Street came in from China and he began to tell about some of the things in China including a few words he had picked up and that just got me interested in China to learn more about China. But we didn't really receive any kind of news that would tend to make us sense that the end, you know, other than the fact that the Emperor had asked that the war end and then we began to see things about the– the trial or should I say the execution of the Japanese war criminals.

Interviewer: So when did you return to the United States?

Britton: May 6th, 1946 I think it was, yeah.

Interviewer: Were you discharged at that time?

Britton: Yes, in– hawa–Camp Pendleton in California, mm-hmm.

Interviewer: So, did you enter New York University pretty soon after that?

Britton: No I had to go back to – I started at City College but then I had to, you know, let go of that and go back to high school to make up what we call regent's credits. I had a diploma but in New York you're required to complete regent's credits to go to college. In New York that is, I could've gone outside but I wanted, you know, New Yorker so I went to high school at night and completed courses to get my addition regent's credit. I won an awards too for History and for English.

Interviewer: So, when did you enter New York University?

Britton: September 1947. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: And what did you study there?

Britton: I ultimately majored in banking and finance. I mean I took more courses in economics and economic history than I did anything else. [chuckles]

Interviewer: And you were called to active duty during the Korean War?

Britton: Yes, I signed up for rejoining the Marine Corps on 15 March 1948. I felt that I was going to do some more government service and I thought it might be civilian so I just thought I would build up this, these credits, that's why I joined the Marine Corps, but I got called back on the 2nd of September 1950 and I served from then until May of 1951. And one other thing that caused me to get out was I had applied for a commission and someone had remembered that I'd opposed the Marine Corps and ended that interview. I completed everything else and I was at the oral interview but when they found I'd opposed the Marine Corps the interview ended. It was in 194--8 I believe it was, or '49, when President Truman had issued the executive order desegregating the military and setting up the Defense Department. The Marine Corps proposed setting up an all colored volunteer trucking unit in Harlem and I said, "no we've been asking for entry into the regular Marine Corps units, why not just open up those instead of a segregated unit?" And they insisted that was what they wanted to do and so I told them I'd have to oppose it. Well I had been a scout master up at the Abyssinian Church which was handled, headed by one of the two black congressmen, house members at the time, Adam Clayton Powell. I wrote to him, he then wrote to the Secretary of Defense and back came a letter – I received a letter, a copy of a letter to the Secretary of Defense from the Marine Corps Assistant Commandant from personnel and he sent a letter to him saying that hence forth all organizations will be open without regard to race, creed, or color which was wonderful. And by the way, his name was General – Major General O.P. Smith. He became the first Marine general to command integrated troops and that was in the Korean War. But in this case, I took it for granted and I kept a copy of that letter for a long time. I'm sorry I can't find it now, a lot of things got lost transferring between Barbados and New York but that letter is one Colonel reminding me, is very, very significant. Major – Commandants in the Marine Corps don't send letters or copies of their letters to corporals, I was a corporal. They must've sent it to me

because that was significant in their progress and process of – they're replying to the Secretary of Defense, that they were indeed obeying his orders and that was to open up everything. President Truman's executive order had demanded that the services be desegregated and obviously they were opposing him by– I guess they would've promoted the feeling that, yes Mr. President you want black folks to be desegregated but they want to be segregated, and I was determined that that would not be the case. Anyway I–

Interviewer: So, you're responsible for that?

Britton: I will not try to take responsibility – let's say this – they sent me a letter and as I said Commandants don't send copies of their letters to corporals in the Marine Corps. But apparently – we have a little phrase in the Marine Corps it's called CWA: covering your rear end. Maybe they were doing it because also you had to deal with the congressmen to say that– and he was getting increasingly more assertive, he was not one to keep quiet. These particular congressmen, there were only two at the time–

Interviewer: Powell?

Britton: Powell, yeah. There were only two at the time but he was not subject to any reprisals outside. He was a pastor so he was free to speak his mind and he didn't hesitate. The other one might've been – Congressman Dawson – might've been free to speak it but he was not quite as assertive as Powell.

Interviewer: So, what was your service in the Korean War?

Britton: I served, basically my job was helping some of the people who had been recalled to active duty. I took it upon myself as a mission. There were men who had families who were called back to the service overnight which meant giving up their jobs, leaving their families without means of support and what have you and I wanted to make sure that they got their allowances properly sent to their families, that they could set up their things, send money to their families and all those kinds of things. In fact, at one point when my commanding officer insisted that I take some time off and I told him no. I just couldn't do it in good conscious as long as those men, you know, needed help looking after their families. He gave me a pass, which I had 'til recently I don't know what I did with it, but it meant I could leave the camp at any time and return at any time. Now most of the time you get a liberty pass, you get an 8-hour pass or you get 24 hours and maybe even up to 36 hours. But in my case, yeah, I had this thing in my pocket I could leave at any time because that was the way they – maybe the way they appreciated what I was doing and I got along well with all of the officers. Now by this time I was a senior in college at NYU and word gets around. If you have some special significant thing the word gets around even among the officers. So they treated me well, almost like one of them because they knew – I'm sure many of them knew that I'd been an officer candidate, but I also know that based on the Marine

Corps refusal to give me a commission from which I was otherwise qualified, that my time had expired in terms of enlistment, I could request to be immediately discharged, which I did. I got out in June – May – and by July or June I was back at NYU finishing my degree. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: So, describe your early career after graduating from NYU.

Britton: I continued working in–with the camping group New York City Mission Society and I was handling business administration and working with children. I did that for about 3 years then I saw an opportunity, I talked with a gentleman who was head of a new bank starting in Harlem, The Covington Savings and Loan Association, and he invited me to join them. I did become an officer there handling the mortgage business and I lasted there ‘til 1964 and from there I joined the American Baptist Home Mission Society handling the real estate and insurance in Alaska, Hawai’i, Central America, the U.S., Haiti, Puerto Rico, and I did that until January of 1971. By this time I’d been invited to the U.S. government because they were getting involved in this nonprofit sponsored housing but the idea of managing it was something that was still a little bit in the future. And in 1969 I had begun traveling to England, England, and it’d been in housing management business from the 1850s and I began to find some of their literature, what they had been teaching and learning and I became sort of one of the experts in the country on this subject of housing management. It wasn’t just a matter of building structures and putting people in them but rather there was a certain amount of technical things to bring sort of a– we call it socially oriented view of housing that housing was not just the buildings. But it was a place of residence for people but anyway when I went down to Washington to help out on some things including integrating communities and so forth it seemed that my reputation in that field had proceeded me, you know, I was asked to join the government but I did not want to because originally my dear wish had been to be in the diplomat and consulate services but the State Department had a rule that you had to be an officer in World War II and by government regulation I could not become an officer and then the McCarthy years had come up and it didn’t want any parts of government. But I finally decided to come down to Washington and work with the people in housing. Governor Romney was really a lovable person and he had– the person in charge of the housing research was named Harry Finger and so I was– I was real appreciated by both of them and I came in as a Deputy Assistant Secretary which was very high at that time. Secondly in research I was dealing with all the scientific people in the government. Harry Finger had come out of the space program as Associate Administrator so I was his deputy and he brought in a lot of people from the space program so again I was getting a great big education dealing with people from the space program. But interestingly, something else happened, it was very fortuitous, the U.S. was involved with housing bilateral treaties by a number of agreements with other countries and I was there to follow those agreements. One was to the group on

urban affairs in Paris, 24 nations. Urban affairs meant that a lot of things were changing in the world. We see the signs now that we take for granted. The directional signs with arrows, we see blue lights for police cars, red lights for fire, amber lights for environmental. We have special furniture, street furniture we call it, with the lights hanging overhead instead of just hanging on strings. All of those kind of things – some of the others, were housing allowances where people would be given an allowance each month towards their rent and what have you. All of those things came out of that group on urban affairs. I was Vice Chairman of it for a long time, eventually I became Chairman. In fact, I had my own – well Minister of Housing, Secretary of Housing here to become the presiding Chairman of the first ever ministerial level meeting on housing and urban development in Europe. So I– by going overseas so much I was invited to do speeches or do programs for the embassies and I started doing them and apparently they liked them. Whenever you do a program for an embassy they have to send in a report on how you did to the State Department and some other departments of government would get copies of it so my reputation began to rise in terms of dealing with embassies so they, many of the embassies, were asking if I'd come out to visit them and do programs with them. At one point after my meetings in Paris, it was to Iran, and Afghanistan, Pakistan, at the top to the bottom of Pakistan, to India, Bangladesh, and finally to Turkey but it was a lot of things in Africa too. So, as I say by the time I was beginning to get a good, a good appreciation for what I was doing.

Interviewer: And you were appointed ambassador to Barbados in Grenada–

Britton: Usually we're nominated.

Interviewer: You were nominated.

Britton: Yes.

Interviewer: And then confirmed.

Britton: Yeah– no see, the President cannot appoint ambassadors, he nominates ambassadors. The senate confirms and woe be to the person who assumes that he's got it in the bag because the President anoints him. Uh-huh. [shakes head no] If it's get out to the senate that he thinks he's already in, he'll probably be more than likely out.

Interviewer: What was your confirmation process?

Britton: My confirmation progress – process – was really something that I'm very proud of. In the course of it, when I came in the group was sitting around the table. There might've been 9 of them, I think they're total thing is about 16 or so, but the Chairman, Senator Martin of Alabama said "Mr. Ambassador," he said "you don't seem to show much foreign experience," and I said "Excuse me?" and he said, "Your resume doesn't show any foreign experience at all." I said, "May I please see that", and then I said, "Oh my God, how in the world could they do

this?" I said "Senator, I've probably lectured at about 30 embassies." Obviously I started off in Guadalcanal but I said, "In addition, I've covered Africa in all of my travels from Guinea, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and I've been in South Africa as early as 1982" – this was afterwards – but anyway, I began to cite all these countries including Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt what have you. And he said, "that's enough that really—" and I said well I can't understand why the State Department would send over something like that that was so shallow but— and then they asked me about the different officials in the Caribbean. Now there were 2 independent countries, 5 semi-independent countries, and three colonies. The independent ones had prime ministers, the semi ones and premiers, and the colonies had chief ministers. I had not met all of them, but I knew them by name, and I could call them out. And more often than not I would delegate, our nominees did not always understand the names of some of these people. Some names were very, very unusual for example the people in the Malay area usually had very long names and they'd have one single name. So, I could understand some of their difficulty but I knew all of these names and one of the senators commented that I was the first person to come along that knew all of these names and so forth. But having been in New York I was familiar with things in the Caribbean to some extent. As a matter of fact, when I first came into 62nd Street I found that the local church was named St. Cyprian, and that should've been a tip off because black folks don't name their church Cyprian up here. I had to find out later on what it meant. In addition, when I went down to 62nd Street the boys and girls down there were speaking so proper and I realized that I had to get rid of this southern accent, I had to start speaking like that too, but I didn't know that most of the kids were from the West Indies and they had been brought up with the King's English so I changed and so I had this little feel for the West Indies. As a matter of fact, at the in-camping many of the kids from— had West Indian parents.

Interviewer: So how long were you ambassador there?

Britton: Chief of Mission to Barbados in Grenada, something like 2, about a little under three years.

Interviewer: And then you submitted your resignation under Carter?

Britton: Yes, yes. It is the practice that all presidential appointees submit their resignation when there is change of administration or the reelection of a president that they're currently serving. They make their resignations effective on January 20th, the same day that the President gets inaugurated for his second term or get inaugurated for his first term.

Interviewer: And can we turn to your meeting with Elizabeth II? When was that?

Britton: In January, let's see, it was January the – 10th or 11th of 1975.

Interviewer: And that's because those countries were in the Commonwealth.

Britton: Well, yes, they were all in the commonwealth now what happened was this was a Commonwealth Conference and it happened at – she's the leader of the Conference and originally it was all those who recognized Queen Elizabeth as their head of state. When India decided to have its own head of state that reduced the Commonwealth by almost like two thirds or something like that. So, they changed the Commonwealth status to indicate that all had a common British heritage and recognized the Queen as head of the Commonwealth, the Sovereign is head of the Commonwealth. So, she had come down for the Conference and I got commended that's an appropriate time. As it happened the Governor General had been the medical partner for one of the members of my boards, board of directors at the bank where I'd been working, you know I left long ago, but this gentleman still had such a great impression on me. When he found that I'd been nominated as Chief Mission to Barbados, he quickly called the Governor General, his former partner, and told him I'd be coming. But so many other people in the West Indian community called down to say that I was coming and they knew me and that I was alright. So, when the Governor General came down with Queen Elizabeth he introduced me and said, "Britton, that's an odd name for an American," I said "No ma'am the Commonwealth, the mother country, is ubiquitous." She laughed and I said, "But I hadn't seen you since 1940" and she said "Where?", and I said, "At the World's Fair" and I went on to describe. I said, "Your parents were very prim and proper but you and your sister were having a great time, oh you were just laughing and really enjoying yourself" and she said, "You know, it's the best vacation we ever had and it was the last vacation we had. My father got sick, the war began, we had to go to the country and you know how the responsibilities began after that" and I said, "Yes ma'am, I've sympathized with you many times."

Interviewer: You're very close in age

Britton: Yes, yes and she said–

Interviewer: A few months apart.

Britton: She said, "Well you were rather young", I said "Yes ma'am, but so were you" and she laughed. [chuckles] And by this time everybody on the end of the line were bent over wondering what in world is going – why is she spending so much time with this American. But needless to say the Governor General was so pleased, he was just so pleased, and you know I have to mention something that – when I was in Guadalcanal one of the books that I came up on was called Give Yourself Background by F. Fraser Bond. Just the other day I was meeting one of the enterprising college presidents in the United States his name was William R. Harvey at Hampton University. It's the only historically black university with a contract with NASA plus they've erected a proton laboratory – proton center. I

don't if you know what a proton is but, you know, generally when you get radiation treatment it's a blast that covers an area in which the cancer cells are located. With the proton you can zero with pinpoint accuracy into it so you don't kill all off all your good cells. You zero in directly on the malignant cells. But this man is such an enterprising person, last year he gave a million dollars to his little Alma mater, Talladega – not last year maybe two years before and two million dollars to the current place where he works. He also had one of the largest Pepsi-Cola franchises in Michigan and he had that before he came to Hampton. I was up there on this minority men's health initiative and well as I said I happened to meet him for the very first time. We talked for about 15 minutes before he was about to do his 5 minute speech and then he invited me over to his office the next day to discuss things further and I gave him 5 or 6 of my papers that I – I've been doing a lot of essays recently – gave him about 5 of those. He started reading them and the first thing that caught his attention is my mentioned of a book called Up From Slavery by Booker T. Washington and he said, "You know, I've read that book ten times." Well I've never had a college president read my writings and comment on, I was so honored that he did but that was something that it – went back to this book and I mentioned it to him and he immediately called his secretary to tell her to find that book. It was first printed in 1939 and the second printing in 1942. I've often wished someone would do an up-to-date edition of it. I met the author of it who was a professor at NYU, but I've often thought about some of the things that's happened in life and thought that they flowed form some of these other things. For example, my talking with Queen Elizabeth reminded me of some of the articles like Give Yourself Background book or You Won't be Snubbed Getting the Most Out of Life from Reader's Digest, books, essays. And the fact that she would ever tolerate me for 5 minutes just to stand there and then talk with her. Normally, you know, you just sort of shake hands and keep going but here she's not only engaged in conversation responding but, you know, recognizing me. I have to tell you this gentleman who used to call me asked – told me he wanted me to be a gentleman and scholar reminded me that the Kristal University in Albania gave me this honorary degree and called me a scholar, Dr., learn the laws, and then having been designated by President Ford as a gentleman to represent the United States made me think that all of this is coming to fruition and that book I still recommend to young men and to young women because it talked about so many basic things: language, physical fitness, literature, geography, and so forth, you know, it really means that when you talk with people no matter what level all that kind of business you talk with people who you can really engage in conversation with and you don't have to be as rich as they are or as well educated as they are but the fact is that you have something to say that interests them. That's the important thing and that's what seemed to be, seemed to flow from that book, yeah.

Interviewer: Well, Ambassador, can you tell me about your family?

Britton: Yes, my second wife is Vernell Stewart of Jacksonville, Florida. She's a nutritionist by background, RD, and she currently does some auditing of the school lunch program in Atlanta, okay, she's my second wife. My first wife was killed in an automobile accident some years ago. I met her at highsc -- college. She majored in accounting at NYU with me. She's originally out of Texas.

Interviewer: What was her name?

Britton: Ruth Beatrice Augustine Baker. I have 5 children; my oldest son lost his life in the Air Force in 1976. He was in a drowning accident up in Oscoda, Michigan. My next oldest son, middle son, in fact he called me just as he was coming up here, he's in Texas. He's been a fire chief and some other things down there. My -- I have, actually, three sons and two daughters. Yeah. One daughter is in Florida, she served 13 years in the Navy. My son in Texas served I think about 2 years in the Air Force and I have another son in New York, he's the youngest child. He's in the transit system. Some kind of instructor or something up there and my older daughter is retired from the post office, she's living in New York now.

Interviewer: How did you end up in Atlanta?

Britton: The second wife. But let me say it this way, in 1974 I was invited by the late Herman Russell, he just died but I think he was one of the richest African-Americans in Georgia. The Russell Construction Company. He and another gentleman, Dr. Lowe I think, had invited me to become President of Citizens Trust Bank and I agonized over it because I ideally wanted to get into the diplomatic thing that was my lifelong ambition, a low rank in the diplomatic and consulate service, I couldn't get in there. I still have a letter, 1952, my writing to the State Department pleading, you know, my skills would be -- but they would have no part of it so I ended up thanks to President Ford and President Nixon, who would've nominated me had he stayed in office, to bring me in at the top. And also give thanks to Senator Strom Thurmond who I got know and appreciate for all of his background and what he had done. Obviously, he ran on the segregations platform in 1948 and many people remember that. Few people ever knew that he retired from the Army as a Major General or that he had received the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart for his services during World War II. He was launched in one of these flying coffins. It was -- I would call a glider with no propeller, no fuel, and no way of guiding it. You landed simply by crash landing. He went out on D-Day so I had a lot of respect for Senator Thurmond, he was one of the hardest working men in the senate and apparently he -- for whatever reason -- maybe he knew I was doing a lot for South Carolina had a lot of respect for me. He told me anytime you need me to use me as your senator and so when my nomination got a little bogged down because even the President has, you know, to go through a lot of hoops trying to get things done. When I was asked for any political support I called on Senator Thurmond and he immediately called the President and there was no problem what so ever at that point. So, I give him a lot

of credit, yes I do, President Ford and President Nixon and those behind who really seemed to have a lot of faith in me. One person Greg Lebedev, when I said listen if you've got better candidates don't hesitate to, you know, and he said, "No," he said "You are the best", and he said "The country will be better for it if you – when we get your nomination through." Which is, you know, very flattering to me, I appreciate it, yeah.

Interviewer: Can you hold up your medal for us?

Britton: Yes. [holds up medal] I might also read the back of it for you.

Interviewer: Yeah just a bit higher.

Britton: [Holds his medal higher]

Interviewer: There we go, and if you'd like to read the back.

Britton: Okay. "For courage and perseverance that inspired social change in the Marine Corps." And let me give you a little thing and point out, many of our fellas came from the South, they were brought up to be well, sort of shuffling when they walked, maybe mumbling when they talked, soft spoken and everything, very deferential and things in the South at times were not always very friendly to them in fact it meant stepping off the sidewalk or something when they were approached by white folks. When they went in the Marine Corps they had to stand erect, they had to look a person in the face in the eye, when they were called upon to speak they couldn't mumble they had to speak loudly. In addition, they were taught to use a weapon, to break it apart blindfolded, put it back together. They were taught to use a bayonet, to sharpen it, and finally we were taught with our hands to kill a person. These were the kind of men who were trained and went back to the South. True we did a lot to change the Marine Corps but when you have that kind of person walking down the street it's a different kind of a person. So many of the men who came from the South went back as different kinds of people. Not to be arrogant, not to be boisterous or something but just to stand erect as good, solid American citizens. I've had a lot of experience with the Marine Corps, where as I came out as a very lowly rank, now like last week when I went to Quantico I was treated as a top rank General officer in the Marine Corps and given the most lavish quarters in the Marine Corps so the Marine Corps has done so much for me. For a long time I was one of those people who did not regard it as very much in my life but as I've grown older and especially after I got to know General Amos and his wife Bonnie, the Marine Corps has meant everything to me. I proudly wear my medallion now, the globe and anchor, and I proudly talk of my experience in the Marine Corps. So that's what it's meant but a lot of other folks have learned to appreciate more their service in the years that have passed. I don't know if you've ever heard of Mayor David Denkins of New York. Dave and I got back many, many years. It wasn't until many, many years afterwards that I realized he'd also been in the Marine Corps. We sat together

with the Commandant and the Sargent Major when we received our gold medals,
but I've met so many other wonderful people in that time too who served with me.

Interviewer: Thank you Ambassador Britton and we'll conclude there.