



Interview with Ernest Henderson

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Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University
Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life
in the Jim Crow South

Interview
with
ERNEST HENDERSON

July 13, 1994

Sally S. Graham,
interviewer

Graham: Today is July 13 [1994], and I am Sally Graham. I am sitting in Mr. Henderson's living room. Your story is very fascinating. I'm sitting amidst all your photographs. Why don't you start with your childhood.

Henderson: All right. I was born up in Lawrence County, South Carolina, on a two-horse farm, they call it. My father was a renter; in other words, he would rent the land and work all the year, and at the end of the year, cotton was our main crop, and that's when we'd see the money, at the end of the year when we sold the cotton. During the year, my father would have to borrow money and borrow food, in other words, get flour and meal, sugar, on the credit, and at the end of the year when he'd sell the cotton, he paid back the man. So we had very little

left.

It's a peculiar thing about the farm at that time. Each bale of cotton brought in a certain amount of money. If he had a good year and got fourteen bales of cotton, the man in charge would seem to have it figured out so there would be two bales of cotton left for us; all the rest go to him. If it were a poor year, got only five bales of cotton, two bales came us the same way, and he kept the three. In other words, it seemed as though two bales of cotton was all we could get at the end of any one year. But we went through that. We made it.

Of course, as a farm boy, I had to do all the things that a farm boy does, work at feeding the cows, feeding the horse, going to school, prepared. One day I was in the field plowing behind an old slow mule, and I heard a noise. I thought it was behind me. I looked back and I didn't see anything. Then I looked up. A small airplane was flying overhead, the first airplane that I had ever seen. I said, "Whoa!" I stopped the mule and watched that plane until it faded into the distance. I thought to myself, "If I could just touch one of those little flying machines, I'll be happy," not knowing that ten years later I was a flight instructor in an airplane, teaching others to fly. But I had a long way to come before I got to that

point.

Leaving the farm, I went to elementary school in the country and went to high school at Bell Street in Clinton, South Carolina. Of course I had to sell vegetables to get money to go to high school, because high school charged tuition at that time. Then when I finished Bell Street High School, I wanted to go to Hampton Institute and take business administration, and, of course, I had to sell products off the farm to get money to go to Hampton.

Finally I got into Hampton Institute. I had \$2.50 left after I'd paid my tuition that day. So I was there on the campus. My parents couldn't afford to send me to college. I went with the idea that I was going to work my way through. They had a program where the first year in college, you work during the day and go to school at night. That's what I did the first year. So the first year, then I started going to school in the daytime and working at night. I had a full course of studies in the daytime, and at night I was a night guard. I would come on and guard at 11:00 o'clock and work until 6:00 in the morning. The next week I'd come on at 6:00 in the evening and work until midnight that night. So I was working at night and going to school in the daytime.

I became a member of the ROTC, and I love that organization very much. I became a second lieutenant in the ROTC. I liked to drill, and that was my first opportunity to give orders to others, because I had been receiving orders all of my life, and now I could talk to those and giving them commands of what to do, and that's where I really built up my self-confidence where I could talk to others.

That was about the year 1939, and at that time war began to break out in Europe, World War II, and people were fighting. Here in the United States, the white students our age in college started enlisting in the Army Air Corps to go in as pilots rather than as regular Army men on the ground, and they were accepted. Blacks tried to go in also, but they would not accept our application because of our color. They said we couldn't fly. In fact, when we first went to the place to register, they said, "We don't need any night fighters." Of course, we passed that off; we were just trying to get into the Air Corps. Because of our color, they said that.

Then, of course, we said we were not going to let anything stop us. What they did to try to appease us, the federal government, under the Civil Aeronautics Administration, CAA, organized some civilian flying schools and put them into six

black colleges, one with Delaware State College, West Virginia State College, Howard University, Hampton Institute, A&T in North Carolina, and Tuskegee, Alabama. That was six.

Of course, we were flying small airplanes, little civilian planes, very light, no connection with the Army whatsoever, and so I took that course. Of course, I liked it. When I finished that course, I received my private pilot's license, and upon receipt of my private pilot's license, that gave me permission and authority to fly anytime I wanted to and the type of airplane that I used, take up friends, take up passengers, but I could not charge for any flying I was doing, because it was private, not commercial.

Of course, we were not satisfied. So we let the government know that we were not satisfied. So they organized at Tuskegee an advanced flying school for civilian pilots--still civilian, not the Army. So I went to Tuskegee, Alabama, where I took the advanced flying course, I took the commercial course. I got my commercial pilot's license, which took 200 hours to get the commercial course, and I took on the 40 hours at Hampton Institute to get the private license, but Tuskegee took 200 hours to get the commercial license.

Graham: What year were you at Tuskegee?

Henderson: I went to Tuskegee in 1941, the early part of 1941.

Of course, I got my commercial pilot's license, and we also had a cross-country course to teach us how to fly from one airport to another without getting lost. See, flying around the airport was easy, but to fly from one airport to another and to another and back home without getting lost, we had that course, which was called the cross-country course.

After we had the cross-country course, we took the instructor course, which made us instructors then. So at that time I was a flight instructor, had a commercial pilot's license, also had ground school instructor rating. I could teach at ground school in aviation. Of course, at that time we were still flying civilian planes, and they would not let us get into an Army aircraft.

So Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, who was the president's wife at that time, came to Tuskegee. She heard of our plight, our desire to get into the Air Corps, so she came down there to look us over. She came to the little airport. It was a dirt field, no runway, just open field. She watched the men take off and land, and the students take off and land, so she decided to fly

herself. She took a flight with our chief pilot; he was black.

She took a flight and she came back down and went back to Washington to talk with her husband, to convince him to let us fly in the Army.

But in the meantime, a black pilot filed a lawsuit against the War Department for not letting him in the Air Corps, and about a week after that suit was filed, they announced that they were opening up the flying school at Tuskegee to train cadets to be taught by black pilots. And that's what we wanted. That's when we really got an opportunity to start teaching with the Air Corps.

Graham: What year was that?

Henderson: That was in early 1942, late 1941, early 1942. Men came to Tuskegee to go into the Air Corps, but they had to take instructions from us, as civilian pilots, to teach them.

After they entered the first course of cadets, these are the cadets that you see--I'll show you. At that top right-hand corner there-- [Tape interruption]

When the cadets came to Tuskegee to take their training, we were civilian flight instructors teaching Army Air Corps cadets.

This was the set-up. The federal government supplied the cadets, the men, to take the training, and the airplanes, and Tuskegee Institute took the responsibility of lodging the men and giving them training. So Tuskegee furnished the instructors and the lodging, but the federal government furnished the cadets and the airplanes. Then we started teaching them to fly in the primary flying course. That's what I taught. We were flying PT-17s. That's one up there, that yellow plane. That's the kind that we flew.

Graham: PT-17s.

Henderson: Yes. PT stands for primary trainer. PT-17. We trained them in that. In that plane we taught them many, many maneuvers, many things that they had to do, not just take-offs and landings, but we had to teach a lot of unusual flying.

May I see that plane? Just to give you an idea, first we had to teach them to straight-and-level flight, which is carrying the airplane straight and level. We taught them turns, ordinary turns. Then we taught them climbs and we taught them glides, to come down. So those four things are the fundamentals of flying: straight and level, turns, climbs, and glides. And

everything else you do in an airplane is a combination of those things.

So we had to teach them first to make not only normal turns, but steep turns, because we knew that when they got in the Air Corps and maybe got in battle against the enemy, they would have to make some very steep turns. We taught very steep turns. The man who could make the steepest turn without stalling out is the man who would live the longest; that's the way we put it, because we had to teach them to make steep turns.

We also had to teach them many things to do with the airplane, not that they would do it in combat, but they had to have a good feel of the airplane so in case they got into a situation they'd know how to get out.

We had to teach them how to do slow rolls, just like this, roll it over, to the right, and slow rolls to the left. We had to teach them snap rolls. Snap roll is you pull it up and you flip it over, stop it in the right position. That's a snap roll.

Graham: When you were learning how to be a pilot, are these the kinds of things you learned?

Henderson: We had to learn that. They taught it to us first. We had all this down pat, and then we started teaching the cadets. All of this was taught to us first before we started teaching them.

They taught me to do half snaps, snap roll, stop it, invert it, and roll back over. That's a half snap. You have to do the half snap. Then they had to do the half roll and Split S. Half roll, you roll over on your back and bring it out from the bottom. That's a half roll and Split S. It's you roll over on the back and bring it out from the bottom. That's a Slot S.

When a student first starts flying, we take our time before we get to these maneuvers, do small things first, but when they get to this, they are used to it.

Graham: How many months would it take to get to a half roll and Split S?

Henderson: To get to half roll and Split S, you'd take about three weeks, three or four weeks. We worked real fast. That's one thing about the Army, they had a very fast course. In other words, they had to solo within eight hours, between eight and twelve hours of flying time. We start flying, and, of course,

the first flight, we just take them up for orientation, just flying around and let them feel how the airplane flies without doing any maneuvers. The second flight when we take them up, we start doing steep turns, you see. Then the next time we take them up, we start doing steep climbs, very steep climbs, turning to the left and to the right.

We taught them forced landings. Now, in a real forced landing, the airplane engine stops and you have to find a place to land. It glides. Those planes will glide a long way. It's not like these big jets, because the jets come down. But these planes used to glide a long way and find a pasture and land in the pasture if you want to.

Of course, we taught them forced landings, but we did not land. What I would do, I would close the throttle. It was still idle. The engine was running. I'd close it and say, "Forced landing." He was in the back seat, I was in the front. He would have to look out, first try to find some smoke, see which way the wind's blowing. We have to land facing the wind, always--not downwind, facing the wind. If the smoke was going that way, the wind's coming from this way, so he's got to come around on that side and land this way.

So after he found out the direction of the wind, he would

find a nice field to land in, maybe a pasture is very good. The best place to land is in a pasture, because it's usually hard where the cows have been grazing and everything, if there are no stumps. In an open field, a cotton field, it's all right except it may be soft, and when you land, the airplane might nose over. So we taught forced landings.

Then we had to teach different types of eights. We taught pylon eights, which we'd pick up two points, one point there and one point here. Fly to that point and fly around that point about 500 feet off the ground, they come back, fly around this point and go back 500 feet off the ground, fly around that point and come back. We were teaching them to make turns close to the ground and have control of the airplane and everything. That's what we taught them, those eights.

Then the high maneuvers that we taught, we taught them lazy eights, a maneuver which I'm very proud of because a lazy eight is flying the airplane like this. It looks very uneventful, unconcerned, but this maneuver saved one of my students' life overseas.

Graham: How is that?

Henderson: Here's what happened. When they went overseas, they were flying--well, I might as well tell you now. The airplanes that we flew at Tuskegee were all used planes. Montgomery, Alabama, had a white school for the white cadets. When they would get new airplanes, they would send their used planes to us. Of course, I'm so thankful to God that we had some good tip-top mechanics that kept our planes in good condition.

Even after they left us, they went to the advanced flying school where they flew heavier planes. They flew the BT-6 and the AT-6, faster plane. That's an AT-6 behind the two of us standing together, an airplane that when you take off, you can retract the landing gear. I got my instrument rating in that thing.

I got instrument rating, too; I forgot to tell you. So what happened, and what went into the history books, I was the first black person from South Carolina to get a commercial pilot's license, a flight instructor's rating, ground instructor's rating, and commercial license. I was the first from South Carolina to do that.

So we had to teach them to do those maneuvers. When they went overseas, the first time they flew new airplanes was when they were overseas, got up to fight the enemy. There they had

new airplanes--P-40s. Yeah, P-40s. They flew with P-40s for a while, but later they found out that they were a little bit sluggish and weren't quite maneuverable, so they started flying the P-51s, the Mustang. P-51, made by the British. That was a very maneuverable plane.

Now I'll tell you how this lazy eight saved the man's life.

One of my men was flying in a P-51. You see, they had sometimes what they call dog fights in the air, where one enemy plane would try to shoot one of our Allied planes out of the air, you see. My man was trying to shoot him out of the air. If you can get behind him, you have the advantage, because the guns are mounted in the wings. In flying an airplane, you had two pedals, your right foot on one pedal, left foot on the other pedal, your right hand on a stick that came up in the center--no steering wheel. A stick came up through the center of the plane; we call that the control stick. And your left hand on the throttle. The trigger to your gun was in the top of that stick. All you had to do was press that top with your thumb, the guns would fire. The guns were in the wings.

If you'd get behind an airplane and get him in your sight, all you had to do is press the trigger. The man who tried to get behind you, you know that he has the advantage because he

can shoot you out of the air. So if you had dog fights, sometimes they were just flying around, trying to get behind each other. But once a Messerschmidt, a German plane, came out and started to attack one of my men. See, this P-51 could fly about 250 miles an hour. The Messerschmidt could fly 500 miles an hour.

So he got behind my man, and my man knew he couldn't outrun him, because he didn't have enough speed. He knew he could not climb him, because those jets could climb straight up. He knew he couldn't dive and get out of the way, so he started doing what we called lazy eight. He modified it like this, and the man behind couldn't get a sight on it. The Messerschmidt was flying so fast, it passed by him, and he started to turn around to get behind him again, he had to make such a large arc, my man turned on the inside of him and shot him out of the air. So this P-51 outwitted a Messerschmidt which was flying twice the speed. So this maneuver over here saved his life, because the man could not get a sight on him.

Graham: When do you remember hearing from your student?

Henderson: What happened, when the men would go over, sometimes

they would be released, you know, to come back at times. But reports came back from the headquarters. I might say this. When he first went over, there were some organizations in this country that tried to put out the rumor that the black pilots were afraid and didn't want to fight, they were afraid over there, but that was not the case, because those men wanted to fly, they were anxious to fly. Of course, this report came back. I don't know just what source this came through, but it came back and told us that this man had outwitted that Messerschmidt.

Graham: Was the source foreign? Was it not from an American source?

Henderson: Yes, it was American, from an Allied source. You see, the Allies were the French, the English, and the Americans fighting against the Germans, so they came from our American sources, yes.

Graham: That said blacks were afraid?

Henderson: Yes, said blacks were afraid. But what happened,

those blacks would have so much confidence in themselves, they painted the tail of the airplane red for identification.

[Laughter] If anything went wrong, they said, "A red-tailed plane did it," but they were so confident, they painted the tails red.

Of course, some of the first missions they were given when they got overseas was escorting bombers to the targets, because the bombers had to carry a load of bombs to the enemy target to drop, and when one bomber got up, they usually sent about three pursuit planes to protect it, one on the right, off the right wing, one off the left wing, and one in front, and it was possible to have one behind, four, to protect that one bomber. If an enemy aircraft or pursuit plane started shooting the bomber out of the air, a couple of these pursuit planes would turn and chase them away, shoot him out of the air or chase him away, and they'd come back and escort the bombers to the place.

Of course, one of the first missions they gave the men before they were escorting was to do a strafing mission. A strafing mission is shooting something on the ground. At Pantaleria, that's on the southern coast of Italy--Pantaleria. So after fifteen days of strafing it, the enemy post gave up,

and our men had won, those black pilots.

Then one of the other missions, it seems as though it might have been a test to see what these black pilots would do, they sent sixteen bombers out on one mission to go to bomb someplace, and use only six pursuit planes. That was off, you see, because you needed more pursuit planes, but only six pursuit planes escorting sixteen bombers. But they would fly near the front and they would come back and get in the back. They would just be all around him, you see, to keep the enemy aircraft from bothering them. They escorted bombers over Romania, Poland, Yugoslavia, over Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary, all those German countries. They escorted bombers over all those places.

In all of the escort missions, they did not lose a bomber. During the whole mission over there, they did not lose a bomber, and that was the record that was given to them by the commanding officer. At the end of the war, he commended them for the work that they had done.

Graham: Were there any black bombers?

Henderson: No, not at that time, but they were training black bombers in B-25s. Those were the bombers that they were using.

That was the name of their plane. Of course, they had trained the men, but just before they sent the men to it, the war came to an end, just before the black bombers went in.

This man over here, "Chappy" James, I don't know if you've heard his name or not, his name was Daniel James, Daniel "Chappy" James. He was a bomber pilot, but he was not in the European theater; he went into the Pacific area. He came through Tuskegee with us, got his training, but he went overseas, and he had 63,000 men under his command at one time. "Chappy" James, bright man. He retired later and went to work in the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., but he passed about five years ago.

Graham: When they were over Pantaleria, what year was that?

Henderson: They started in 1943. Must be early 1943.

Graham: Would they have been lieutenants then?

Henderson: Before they left Tuskegee, when they came to us, they were cadets, advanced flying still at Tuskegee, and cadets, but when they finished flying as cadets, they became

lieutenants, flying lieutenants. They had their officers.

Graham: Flying lieutenants in the pursuit planes.

Henderson: Yes, flying the pursuit planes.

Graham: Was that in 1943?

Henderson: Yes. In 1943, when they went over. They trained in 1942, and they went to Casablanca, that's where they landed, in Casablanca. Of course, they flew from different bases over there. Their commanding officer was B.O. Davis. His name was Benjamin O. Davis. He came through Tuskegee as a cadet. He was training as a cadet, and he went on overseas and became the commanding officer there.

Graham: Were you an instructor?

Henderson: I was an instructor at Tuskegee when they were there. Yes, I was an instructor, that's right. I didn't instruct them, however; I think some other men instructed them.

"Chappy" James came through as a cadet, too, but he went to the

Pacific to be a commanding officer. They kept several of the civilian pilots there at Tuskegee to train in case the men were lost or they needed replacement. They'd have men ready to go over and take their places. I always tell that they kept some of the best pilots there as instructors. [Laughter] But I enjoyed it, because I was teaching and learning, myself, at the same time.

Graham: Did most of the pilots come from Tuskegee?

Henderson: All over the United States.

Graham: Six different black colleges?

Henderson: The six different black colleges had advantage of flying early in the civilian planes, and when they came into the Cadet Corps, they could fly already, you see, and it was not hard for them to get on into the Air Corps. But there were many others who did not get that. See, these six black colleges were just more or less in the South and the East--Delaware, West Virginia, Iowa, Hampton, A&T North Carolina, and Tuskegee--because it was the South that was putting up the biggest fuss,

you know, to try to get into the Air Corps.

Of course, as I say, when they went into the Air Corps, they had some training already, but they had to fly the Army way. The Army always has a way of doing it. We became flight instructors in the civilian area and we started teaching the cadets. We had to take an Army course. Instructors came to teach us how to fly. We already knew how to fly, but they just had to carry us through some procedures--the Army way, what they call it. So we got our training through the Army.

Of course, while we were at Tuskegee, they had white commanding officers there. Colonel [Noel] Parrish was one of the main officers at Tuskegee, and he was very nice.

Graham: So they were white instructors that instructed you?

Henderson: Well, when I first went to Tuskegee, we had white instructors to teach us, because we were students when we went to Tuskegee. We were advanced students taking the commercial course. Let me see. Right here--this little man right here is Italian. He was my instructor. He's an Italian. The plane in the background is the plane that we learned to take the advance course when we first went to Tuskegee.

Graham: A PT-18?

Henderson: No, it was a Waco. When we went to Tuskegee, they had one plane to teach in the advanced course, same size as the PT-18, but it was a little bit different. It landed easier. That's a hard plane to land; it's stiff and will turn around on you quick. But this is a very smooth plane they were flying here, called Waco UPF-7. That's what we flew there.

Of course, this is the picture they took after I gave an air show at Tuskegee. Some Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts and 4-H Clubbers came to the airport, came to Tuskegee to visit the campus, and they decided to come to the airport just to see us fly. So when I got out there, my instructor said, "Ernie, take this plane up and give these folks an air show." [Laughter] I went up and did a little bit of everything that I knew.

Graham: What kinds of things did you do?

Henderson: Oh, what I did, first I went up and I did a loop. Now, a loop is something that looks spectacular, but it's very easy--dive the airplane, bring it up, and bring it over. That's

a loop. And I did a slow roll, I did a snap roll, flip it over, and then we did some other maneuvers which we did not have to teach the cadets, but we had--yeah, we taught them, too, so they'd know what the airplane would do. We taught an vertical reverse. You turn the airplane steep, flip it over, turn that way, flip it over, turn that way; that's a vertical reverse.

We also had Falling Leaf. You get it very high and press one pedal, it comes down like this. You know, a leaf doesn't fall flat; a leaf goes up from one side to the other. We called that the Flying Leaf. We also had to teach them the spin, too.

We taught these to the cadets. A tailspin, you get up and pull the airplane into a spin, the nose comes down, the airplane is coming down just like that. When you get low enough, you use the control to stop the turn, pick up speed, and pull back up. Had to teach all that to them so in case an airplane fell into a spin while they were fighting, they'd know how to get out of it.

That's the main reason.

And also in that air show, I did two maneuvers that were not in the book, something I made up on my own. The slow roll is like this. I was the first one to do this at Tuskegee; I did a hesitation roll. Go out there and stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, and keep the airplane going straight. That's hard to do,

because you're changing rudder controls during that time.

That's a hesitation roll.

Graham: Did you come up with that idea in your mind?

Henderson: I did it in my mind. The next one was a vertical eight. Now, a vertical eight is like this. Well, let me first tell you. You saw what a loop was. Now, an Immelman is another maneuver that we had to teach. It's very difficult. You dive the airplane, you put it up, and instead of going into a loop, you roll it over and stay up there. That's a very difficult maneuver.

I forgot, we also taught them the Cuban eight. A Cuban eight is like this: dive the airplane, bring it over, when you get it here, you roll it over in a dive, come over here, roll it over again, you dive, roll it over like that. That's a Cuban eight.

Now, I did a vertical eight, which is not in the book. I've never seen anybody do it since I did it. A vertical eight, I made a combination of the half roll, Split S--no, first a loop, a half roll, Split S, and an Immelman. I did the top part of the vertical eight first, an eight that stands up, you know,

like you write an "8" on the wall. I did the top part first. I dove the airplane, pulled it up, did an ordinary loop. As soon as I finished the loop, I rolled over on the back and did a Split S in the bottom part of the loop, came up, and rolled out in the center. I had fun with the vertical eight.

Graham: How did you come up with these kinds of maneuvers?

Henderson: Well, the loop is taught to you in the book, how to do the loop. The Split S is taught how to do. You turn over on your back, pull out from the bottom. That's a Split S. That's something you can do maybe in combat. If a man can get after you, you could roll over on your back and pull out from the bottom. The only thing, you've got a low altitude, and the man who has the high altitude always has an advantage, because he can dive on you. So you wouldn't do that in combat very much.

So we were taught how to do the loop, how to do the half roll, Split S, we were taught how to do the Immelman. So I just put them together for the combination. Did the loop first, half roll, Split S, and Immelman, start at the center.

Graham: So the first times that you tried these, were you

successful?

Henderson: Yes. I think this is the first time I tried it, in that air show. [Laughter] It was successful.

Graham: How did you feel?

Henderson: Confident. I had confidence in myself. In other words, the biggest thing, make sure you have plenty of speed. If you don't have speed when you get up here, the airplane will drop out on you. You've got to pick up speed. But if there's plenty of speed and have it under control, you can do most anything the airplane can do.

But there's one thing we always taught not to try to do: an outside loop. You see, a loop like this is normal, but outside loop, try to do a loop like that, that would pull your wings off. So we were told never to try an outside loop.

Graham: What did your superiors think when you succeeded in putting all these maneuvers together?

Henderson: [Laughter] They called me "Ace." They named me

"Ace" Henderson, ace pilot. They always called me that around the campus. "There's Ace." Yes, sir.

Graham: So you earned that.

Henderson: I earned that. Another thing I earned, too, but it's in the book somewhere, it says, you see, most of those pilots were from all walks of life. Some were doctors, some were lawyers, some were photographers, but they came to Tuskegee, we all were teaching, doing the same thing. We were all on one common level. Most of them would drink when they'd get their paycheck on payday, and they'd head for a wet county-- Tuskegee was in a dry county--in a little place called Notasoga [phonetic] about thirty miles up the road, was in a wet county. You could go up there and get you some beers and things.

So I did not drink. There were three of us, out of thirty-nine instructors, instructors there, thirty-nine instructors, only three of us did not drink at all. One was James Wright, Claude Platt [phonetic], and Ernest Henderson. Neither one of us drank anything strong. So when they'd reach for a beer, I reached for a Pepsi-Cola, so they named me "Pepsi-Cola" Henderson. [Laughter] My nickname.

Graham: So with certain people you were "Ace," and with certain people you were "Pepsi-Cola" Henderson.

Henderson: Yeah, "Pepsi-Cola" Henderson.

Graham: What did the ladies think about your flying?

Henderson: Well, at the beginning when we went to Tuskegee, we had some ladies taking flying themselves.

Graham: Really? Black women?

Henderson: Black women taking flying. Mildred Hanson and Mildred Henderson, I remember those names very well. They took flying.

Graham: Where were they from?

Henderson: They were from Tuskegee. Both of them were from Tuskegee. They didn't see me doing much flying except when we did those air shows, see, because these other things, we were in

the Air Corps and they went out there at the airports.

Graham: The spectators for the air shows, would that be whites and blacks together?

Henderson: Well, very seldom they had the whites and blacks, because at the air show it was Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts and 4-H Club people who were visiting the campus. Tuskegee was a black campus. So they visited and came out there. They didn't have many whites watching us fly.

One thing happened at Tuskegee, I was really thrilled and at the same time I was apprehensive. A white patrol, highway patrol, came to the airport and wanted to take a flight. They sent him to me, "Ace" Henderson. [Laughter] I took him up for a flight. We were flying around. I thought to myself, "Now I can do a turn if I want to." [Laughter] But I didn't. I gave him a nice flight and came on back in and landed. So we had a nice time.

Graham: What is it like when you're flying and there's a big drop?

Henderson: Downdraft, called a downdraft and updraft. We stayed clear of those thunderstorms. Thunderstorms will do it to you. If you try to fly through a thunderstorm, one moment the airplane will be just going down, the next moment it'll be going up like that.

Graham: That's what happened to that airplane in Charlotte.

Henderson: It was a sheer. I think the wind changed 90 degrees, suddenly, you see. I think that had something to do with it, because there was a storm, you see. So we try to stay out of the storms.

I remember once I was flying around close to a thunderstorm and I decided to experiment and get close to it. Man, when my wing got to that thing, I took away from it. You just don't play with those things. We have what they call fronts.

We had to take meteorology. We had to study that, meteorology, study the weather. We had to take navigation, how to go one place, you know, and come back. We had to take civil air regulations, knowing what to do, because when you're flying in an airplane at night, if you see a red light, left wing, you know that this man has the right-of-way. Coming this way, you

turn and go behind him. If it's green light, you have the right-of-way. Green light is on the right wing.

Another thing about night flying, we had to do some night flying when we first went to Tuskegee. I may be getting the story kind of--

Graham: However you want to say it, that's great.

Henderson: At Tuskegee, we did not have runways; we just had an open field. We had to do some night flying, and what we did, we had the runways made like this table here. We called it a runway, imaginary. So we had six kerosene lanterns. We didn't have any night lights. At Montgomery at the airport, for the whites, they had bright lights lined up on either side. So we put one lantern on this corner of the runway, one on that corner, one halfway on the right side and one halfway on the left, one at the far end on the right, one at the far end on the left.

Graham: How long was the runway?

Henderson: About 2,000 feet. There was about 1,500 at our

small airport, so we started at these first two lights and tried to be off the ground by the time we got to the middle, second lights. Fly on up. Your altimeter in the airplane shows you. Fly around the pattern, come on around. When you come in to land, you just have to judge it from the three lights, you're above, to try to get down as low as you can. When you pass the first two lights, make sure you're on the ground by the time you get to the second two lights, because if you go past those second two lights, you might run off the end of the runway. That was our night flying. [Laughter]

Graham: How often did you do that?

Henderson: We had it rough. We were required to have ten hours of night flying at a time, so we'd go out there night after night and get an hour of night flying time. That was some rough flying, but we made it.

Graham: Were the hours that were necessary to get your licensing equal for blacks and whites?

Henderson: Yeah, it was equal for blacks and whites. But

different conditions. We had to get forty hours to get a private license, 200 hours to get a commercial license, and then beyond that we just got whatever we'd need to get the kind of rating we wanted.

Instrument rating, I flew in that AT-6. My buddy over there was standing beside me. You see there's two seats in the AT-6, one in the front and one in the back. The instructor is in the front and the student is in the back. So when I'm up practicing my instrument, a hood is put over me so I can see nothing but the instruments, and he is actually flying, looking around, to make sure the airplane is safe around the other airplanes. So we practiced that way until I got ready for my instrument test.

So the day of my instrument test, I was a little bit apprehensive, but I was confident. The inspector came out and said, "Okay, let's go up."

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Graham: Take you back home.

Henderson: Yes. We had a range at our airport. I will just

put it like this. They called it a range where they sent up signals straight up. They had north, south, east, and west, that had the end signal going into the north and south, "dit-dah." We flew by code, too. "Dit-dah, dit-dah." And east and west was "Dah-dit, dah-dit." We had to know the difference. When they came together, "dah-dit" and "dit-dah," it made a hum. When you're on the beam, it made a hum. Get off on one side, you get the "dit-dah." Other side, you get the "dah-dit." That's how you know when you're on the beam and when you get off the beam. And there are four beams leading out from the airport signal.

So when he said, "Let's take me home," I turned on my radio and tuned to my station at Tuskegee and picked up the sound of the "dit-dah." No, first I got a "dit-dah, dit-dah." No, I got the "dah-dit" first, of course, and I knew I was in the south quadrant or north quadrant, I didn't know which. In the north, you get a "dah-dit," and south, you get a "dah-dit."

So what I did, I turned to a southern course, straight south, and turned my radio as low as I could get it. If it built up, I knew I was in the north, coming to the airport. If it faded away, I knew I was going away. So it faded away. I turned it up again to make sure; it faded away again. I knew I

was going away from the airport, so I turned around and made 180 degrees and headed straight back the other way. I knew I was headed generally to the airport. It started getting louder and louder, and I knew I was in the end quadrant, so I wanted to get over to a beam so I could follow it.

So I turned the airplane, took a left, got over to the beam, got that hum, and flew north. The hum started getting louder and louder. I knew I was getting near the airport. I was up at 3,000 feet. It was getting louder and louder, and I knew I was getting near the airport. Then when I crossed the corner south to get quiet, right above the beam in the corner south, everything gets quiet and then picks up after you pass it. So I passed that, and then I headed on north to get the beam coming from the north. Of course, the airport was located south of the radio station, so I flew north and let down at 2,000 feet, flew in on the north beam, made a 45-degree turn off the beam, into the quadrant. I made a 180-degree turn and came back to the beam, headed to the station, and let down to 1,000 feet.

When I figured I was getting closer than 1,000 feet, I was listening to the radio all that time, building up, getting louder and louder, I got down to 500 feet. At 500 feet, I hit

the corner of silence, I throttled back, and I knew the direction the airport was from the station. So as soon as I throttled back, I turned to the airport about 10 degrees. He said, "Okay, come out." He pulled the hood. [Laughter] I was right at the airport. So he gave me my instrument rating, and with that instrument rating you can fly in the clouds, you can fly in bad weather, where you can see nothing but the instruments.

Graham: So you could see nothing?

Henderson: Nothing but the instruments.

Graham: You could see the instruments.

Henderson: That's all I could see. Then, of course, in 1946, I actually flew on some real instruments. I didn't intend to do it, but I actually got into it. What happened, my wife was expecting her first child at Tuskegee. Her home was in West Virginia--Beckley [phonetic], West Virginia. She wanted to go home and spend some time with her mother. So I asked if they would let me fly her up there in one of the airplanes. So they

agreed. I flew the--I don't have a picture of that thing here.

It was a Stenson Reliant, carried five passengers.

So I took my wife and another lady. We had a house in Tuskegee. We were living together. The other lady went with us in case my wife had some problems on the way up; she could take care of her. So we left Tuskegee and flew straight. I went by Knoxville, Tennessee, landed and got some gas, took off from Knoxville, and went on to Beckley and landed. Then they met us at the airport and carried us to the house.

I came back to the airport, and while I was there, I flew several people of my wife's family to come up for a flight, brought them down. We had to land down in a kind of a valley between the mountains. I was flying that big heavy Stenson. It was all right. Then her father said, "When I fly, I'm on my way to heaven." [Laughter]

So after the end of our stay, I left my wife there, and this lady and I took off from Beckley and headed back for Tuskegee. I got to Knoxville, Tennessee. I landed and refueled. After I refueled, I took off from Knoxville and headed straight for Tuskegee. Tuskegee was almost straight south from Knoxville. I had to pass Chattanooga, would be on my right, Atlanta would be on my left, so I was going to keep those

places in brackets. So I flew straight.

After a while, clouds started building up under me, so I decided to get a little higher. I got a little higher. I flew about thirty more minutes, and the clouds started building all over me. [Laughter] All of a sudden, I was in the soup. That's what you call "in the soup," when you get in the clouds.

I couldn't see anything but my instruments. Can't see the propeller turning. I was sitting there, I said, "Boy, I'm on instruments now." I had my instruments ready, but I'd never actually flown on instruments.

So I flew a while. I said, "Well, I'd better make some computations." So what I did, I had my map right there. I had a loop radio. I turned my loop toward a station. It becomes silence. If I turn it slightly to the left, I hear noise. The other way I hear a signal. So when I get to silent, I know that that loop is facing the station. I turned that loop 'til I got a silence, and then I drew a line on my map from Chattanooga to where I thought I was. Wasn't sure. Then I turned to Atlanta quickly and got the same thing in Atlanta, and drew a line on my map and they crossed at an angle. I knew I was flying 165 miles an hour, and it took me three minutes to compute that; I figured exactly where I was.

So I said, "I'm going to turn and go to Atlanta. I'm going to get out of this stuff." So I turned and headed straight to Atlanta with my loop. Anytime it changed, when it got a silence, I knew I was fine. Just before I got to Atlanta, the clouds broke and I came down out of those clouds. [Laughter] So that was one time I actually flew on instruments.

Also on that same flight, I didn't land at Atlanta; I called Atlanta and radioed, asked, "How is the weather at Tuskegee?" They said, "It's okay at Tuskegee, but rain is coming in from Montgomery, from a northerly direction." That's where the weather comes in. So I opened that plane up and headed for Tuskegee to try to beat the storm. I got there and I landed, I taxied to the hangar. As soon as I got to the hangar, the storm came in. We got there just in time. So that was one experience that I had which I did not invite, but I actually knew that I could fly on instruments.

But you have to believe your instruments, because when you get in the clouds, when you can't see anything, sometimes you feel like you're turning to the left when you're actually turning to the right, because it's like vertigo. You just don't have a feeling. You might feel you're flying straight and you might be turning. But you've got to watch those instruments--

the needle, the ball, and air speed. The needle is in the center when the airplane is flying straight. The ball is in the center when the wings are level. If the wing goes down, the ball will slide to the right side. If the other wing goes down, the ball will slide to the left. So if the ball was in something like this, you see, if the ball was in something like a semi-circle and the needle was straight, so to keep that needle straight up and the ball centered, you're flying straight. And keep your air speed under control, too, because if you put your nose down, air speed is going to pick up. Pull the nose up, the air speed is going to slow down. So you have to control air speed, needle, and ball and everything.

So instrument is very important to have and to know. All airline pilots, they're familiar with that. But now they have in these airliners instruments that will fly the airplane sometimes without doing anything to it.

Graham: What was the relation of being a black pilot and having an emergency landing in certain airports? Was that ever a problem?

Henderson: No, no problem in landing at all. There's one thing

I must say. We had on our flight uniforms which were quite similar to the Army uniforms. When they saw those uniforms, they respected us. I must give credit. We flew into Andolusia [phonetic], Alabama; Montgomery--of course, that was where the white school was. We didn't fly there too much. And Birmingham. We flew into Birmingham and many other places in Atlanta. When they'd see us in those uniforms, they'd respect us like they did the whites.

But, now, when you get away from the airport, it was different, because if you went from Tuskegee to Montgomery by a bus, you had to stand up. If there were no seats at the back, you may have seats at the front, but you couldn't sit, because that was reserved for the whites. And when you'd go out to the stations and land, when you'd get off the bus, at the bus station there were two water fountains, one said "Whites," one said "Colored." So we knew what it was all about when we went there.

I might say this. The first class of cadets who came to Tuskegee to take their flight training, when they finished that training, they were ready for advanced flight training. Tuskegee was just constructing an advanced airport; it wasn't ready. So they had to stay or fly for about a month or so while

they finished the airport. In the meantime, they sent these cadets to Montgomery, Alabama, to stay in the barracks where the white cadets were staying that month. While they were there, they couldn't fly. They were prepared to fly, but they couldn't fly because of their color. On the weekends, they'd give their cadets passes to go into the city to have fun, and when they asked for passes for our black cadets, they wouldn't give them to them, said they "don't want to pollute the city." That was a knock in the face, but, you know, we couldn't do anything about it.

We had two battles to fight: fighting to fly and fighting against segregation. We didn't worry too much about segregation at the time. We knew we didn't like it, but we didn't try to fight it, because if we tried to fight that, they would say you were troublemakers and put us out of the Air Corps. So we didn't want to do that. Our main thing was to fly. We kind of let this other stuff slide; we didn't worry about that at all. In fact, I was used to that anyway, because I was born in the South. But that was one of the things that we had to swallow, but we kept going.

Graham: Were you one of the cadets that was sent to Montgomery?

Henderson: No, no, I didn't go to Montgomery. I was a flight instructor back at Tuskegee. It was our students that they sent when they graduated, went down there.

While they were constructing the airport for the advanced flying, we had some more cross-country to do as instructors. An airplane that we had had an accident. Our instructor came in, was out flying one day and night caught us and we landed. We didn't have any lights on the airports, you know; we just had a light on the airplane. When they landed the airplane, ground looped, it turned, and the wing struck the ground. It did a little damage to the end of the wing. It was put out of commission for about three or four weeks.

In the meantime, we couldn't fly at the time because that was the plane that we were supposed to fly. We were still in training. They were constructing a new airport, so I went to get me a job. I remember I went to the secretary of the airport there and told her I needed some money to sole my shoes.

[Laughter] She gave me two dollars and a half to have my shoes soled. I remember that. I won't forget her.

Then I went to the airport to get a job. They first gave me a job of picking up bottles with a wheelbarrow, go around

while they were working all over the muddy field, pick up bottles and bring it back to the canteen. That was my job. I was making some money. At the time when we weren't flying, we weren't making any money, we didn't have any spending change.

When I went to Tuskegee, [unclear] supported us. They financed our trip to Tuskegee and told us, "When you graduate, you can get a job and pay us back." So they just left it at that.

So I was trying to make some money, so I picked up bottles. Then finally they gave me a job inside the canteen, when the men came in from work, coming to buy drinks and sodas and peanuts and things. I was selling that to them. So the man who was in charge, he was a very mean fellow, looked like he couldn't get along with anybody. One morning I went and worked, I worked all day, and when night came for me to go home, he told me he didn't want me to go, he wanted me to keep working because they didn't have anybody to work that night. So I worked all that night. I worked all day and I worked all that night. When the morning came, the other man still hadn't come. He wanted me to continue working, and I told him, no, I'm sorry, I had to leave. So I just left the job there. Oh, he raised all kind of Cain. I went on home.

About the next week, our airplane was completed and we started flying again. In fact, we started teaching cadets and started making money. That same man who gave me such a hard way to go came to me, wanted to borrow \$25.

Graham: This was a white man?

Henderson: No, he was black. He was black, in charge of that.

So he came and he said, "I'll let you have this coat for \$25."

It was a very good coat. So I bought the coat from him and gave him \$25. I didn't hold it against him, because he was trying to make money and that was just his disposition. I accepted it.

Yes, sir.

As far as training us when we flew into the airports, they would serve our planes and everything. Everything was nice. We didn't have any problems with segregation there.

One thing, they said--I don't know how true it was, but when we asked for the Cadet Corps, to train cadets, they put us in the Deep South between Mississippi and Georgia. [Laughter] That's all deep segregated states. I said, "If we can make it down there, we should be able to make it," and we made it down there. So we were sandwiched between those two states, but both

ways, people were nice. We went to Pensacola, Florida, flew down there, and we flew other places.

One flight we made, the instructors got what we call a proficiency flight. You fly the airplane for our own benefit, to keep our practice up. So we made a flight to Florida. First we stopped at Waycross, Georgia, went to Lakeland, Florida, and then Arcadia, Florida. I think it's Arcadia, Florida. We went there, went all the way down there. Going down, the leader of the group was about three or four airplanes, saw how high we could fly. See, those planes wouldn't fly but so high. I got to 10,000 feet. When you get up there, the instruments start fogging up. You could hardly see the instruments. It was cold up there. The higher you get, the lower the temperature. For every thousand feet, the temperature drops two degrees. Did you know that?

Graham: I didn't know it, no.

Henderson: For every thousand feet you go, under normal conditions. You may have thunderstorms and things. But normal conditions, every thousand feet you go up, the temperature drops two degrees. And up there at 10,000 feet, it was cold. We flew

into Lakeland and Arcadia, and landed, had a nice time.

On the way back, they later decided to fly low. He flew it right off the treetops over those Everglades, where they aren't allowed to fly, because if you go down, there's just alligators.

[Laughter] There were some pilots who took chances, but we made it back all right. Of course, we went to Florida again to visit one of our instructors who had left the Air Corps.

I might say that when we were in the Air Corps, our uniforms were quite similar to that of the regular Army, but our wings were different. You can't see them on my uniform too well, but the wings would curve up around, would be almost in a circle, and our wings on our breast were quite similar to the Air Corps wings, only they were something like bronze. Those were things that we worked with.

That group there in the bottom right-hand corner, where we're all gathered around together, that's the group that I was teaching when many of the cadets went overseas. The war came to an end in 1945. They came back. Many came to Fort Benning, Georgia, which is not very far from Tuskegee, and we organized the Civilian Flying School, and I was the secretary of that organization. We would train G.I.s--we called them G.I.s, men who had been overseas and came back and wanted to fly. We would

train them to fly. Of course, I think we had a few white students there, too, but that's the group of students that I was training. They had been overseas and came back and wanted to get flying. So after the Army flying at Tuskegee, we flew some civilians flying, also.

Graham: Did most of the black pilots go into the European theater?

Henderson: Most of the black pilots went to the European theater, except that one, "Chappy" James, he went to the Pacific. But most of them went to the European theater.

Graham: Were certain areas trained to go to the Pacific theater? How did he get there?

Henderson: He was too large to fly these small airplanes. He had a large body, so he had to fly bombers. So he flew a bomber, and I think they needed bomber pilots in the Pacific more than there, because that's where [James] Doolittle was, you know, in the Pacific. There were those bombers that went over there, with not much expectations to return. You probably heard

of that group that went over there. "Chappy" James, I don't know just how they selected him, but he was one who went over there, and I believe they kept that thing together.

Graham: How many black pilots were in the war altogether?

Henderson: At Tuskegee we trained 960 pilots. We trained that many; 440 went overseas and 66 were lost in action, I believe it was. Of course, I have a book showing the statistics and the awards that they received and medals, the honors, the Purple Hearts. I have that in the book in there, but I can't recall exactly how many of each. But they received many awards.

Of course, their mission was not only fighting other Germans in the air, but they had to do a lot of strafing on the ground. In addition to Pantaleria, that was the place, but when you'd see Germans moving their ammunition by freight trains, they would shoot up those freight trains and ammunition dumps and radar installations. Anything they saw that belonged to the Germans, you see, they were out to do that.

Of course, there's a difference between missions and sorties. A mission is something that you are told to do, you're given an instruction to do. When they were escorting those

bombers, that was a mission. They were ordered to escort those bombers. Pantalera, when they strafed that place, that was a mission. But sorties is something you do on your own. If you see a need up there, if you see an enemy airplane, go get him; don't wait to be told. They did 1,700 missions, I think, and 15,000 sorties. In other words, they just took so much on their own and went out and did a lot of things on their own.

Graham: How long were you at Tuskegee as an instructor?

Henderson: I went to Tuskegee in 1941 and became an instructor in 1942, and I taught Army aviation cadets through 1945 at the time they integrated the Army Air Corps.

Oh, I might mention this, too. In 1943, they changed the name of Air Corps to the United States Air Force. It used to be the Air Corps, the Army Air Corps. You see, when we started training down there, we were under the Army. Army had that training. But then later, the Air Force had their own training, and they named it the Air Force instead of the Army Air Corps. Of course, I was with them until the end of the war.

Graham: With the Air Corps, the white pilots that were being

trained in Montgomery, were they being trained to go into the same kind of situations that the black pilots were being trained for in Tuskegee?

Henderson: You mean to go overseas?

Graham: Yes.

Henderson: They were going to the same type of thing.

Graham: So they weren't being bomber; they were being trained to be pursuit planes also?

Henderson: Right. Some of them may have become bombers. I didn't keep up too much with them. There was a 79th Air Corps, all whites, over there. Of course, they had two black units over there, the 99th Squadron. Did I mention that?

Graham: No.

Henderson: Oh, that's the main thing, the 99th Pursuit Squadron. That's what they trained for and became--the 99th.

Everybody knows that--all-black unit.

Graham: Where did the pilots come from who were at Tuskegee?

Henderson: Some came from California, from Chicago, New York, all over the United States. One came from Trinidad, I remember.

Graham: Were there many southerners?

Henderson: Yes, I believe we had just about equal southerners as northerners. Yes, we had some southerners. That group there in the middle corner, left-hand corner, all those came from one school--Hampton. All those boys came from Hampton Institute.

Graham: That's where you went, the first school that you went to?

Henderson: The first college I went to.

Graham: What did you get as your degree?

Henderson: I got a degree in business administration. Business

administration was the course I was taking.

Graham: You mentioned that it was quite a fight to be able to fight. Tell me about that.

Henderson: That is what I meant, we were struggling and had to sue the Air Corps to get in. We had to fight the Air Corps to let us in. That's what I meant there. Yeah, because we wanted to get in to fight in the war. That's why we wanted to get in, but we had to fight these people.

Graham: And that's when Eleanor Roosevelt came in? Is that at the same time?

Henderson: Yes, that same time. Yes, she went to Tuskegee about that same time. Then the man filed a lawsuit along about the same time.

Graham: Where was he from?

Henderson: His name was Yancey Williams. I don't know what he was from. I remember his name--Yancey Williams. But he's the

one who helped open the door for us.

Graham: Was he at a different school from Tuskegee?

Henderson: I don't recall him--yes, I'm sure he came through. But the thing about it, each of us instructors had five students each per class, and we didn't come in contact with--we came in contact with them, but we didn't know them by name. With that many instructors and with five students each, you see how many students there were, and so many that we wouldn't see direct.

Graham: How many instructors were there?

Henderson: Thirty-nine.

Graham: Thirty-nine at Tuskegee.

Henderson: Right. Thirty-nine black instructors.

Graham: Was there a commanding officer of all?

Henderson: Yes, the commanding officer was--well, I would say

the chief person at Tuskegee, who was coordinating the early part of flying, was called "Chief" Anderson, Charles Anderson. He's black but he looks like he's white, a very red person. "Chief" Anderson. He was at the beginning of the flying at Tuskegee. You might call him the Father of Black Flying, you might say. Of course, he was there when we went down to train as commercial pilots and getting all our ratings.

When we were learning, he was in charge of us altogether, and then when the Army Air Corps came in, he was still somewhat in charge, but the Army personnel was in charge of the Army part of the flying. That's when we had Colonel Parrish--I mentioned his name--and there were two other colonels there. There was a Major Montgomery and a Major Commany [phonetic]. There were two other white men who came over there and were flying. They would give us a check ride sometimes, to see if we were still proficient, because while we were teaching cadets, they would come and check on us about twice a year, more than that, to see if we were still flying proficiently.

Graham: In that situation, what was the relationship of white men who were making sure black pilots were up to par?

Henderson: Well, that was some of those white people who were very, very mean and very concerned, like they didn't want us to fly, but we had learned to fly so efficiently, that there wasn't too much he could say. When they'd take us up and fly, we'd outfly them, we were so accurate in doing our maneuvers. We'd turn and have to keep the altitude, at the same altitude, and roll out at a certain point. We were doing things so accurate, there wasn't too much they could criticize us on our flying, but just the idea that here's a black man climbing up. So you could just kind of feel it sometimes, but they didn't punish us too bad physically, you know, I mean, obviously with it, but we could just tell that some weren't too happy.

Now, Colonel Parrish was open-minded. He was one person everybody liked. Commany was one who was kind of "bigoty," we called it. Montgomery, he was kind of soft-hearted, so he was okay. But Commany was the worst one we had over there. Colonel Parrish was the top. I think he's still living, too.

So the relationship was pretty good between the white commanding officers at our field and the others.

Graham: Did you have much correspondence with the other schools like in Delaware and West Virginia, Howard?

Henderson: No, we never did have too much, except for the individual people who came from the schools. Of course, from Hampton Institute, there was one or two there that we keep in contact, called Roscoe Draper. He and I were roommates at Tuskegee. He lives in Haverford, Pennsylvania. Gibbs was one of the instructors; he organized a flying club in Portsmouth Virginia. He ran it for a while. And Sam was another flight instructor, organized a school out in Muskogee County, Oklahoma.

Then in California, there was a Woods who had a school out there, a flying school. See, after they left, a lot of people organized their own flying schools. Of course, one of our instructors became a highway instructor teaching driver's lessons in California. That was a Maury Rich [phonetic]. I think he was from one of the islands. He went to California when he left Tuskegee.

After the war was over, we have now the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. We have two organizations--the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc.--I'm a member of that--and, of course, that is an organization that consisted mainly of the men who went overseas and fought and came back. Those are the men who actually saw the rough side of the mountain, I would say, and came back. Of course, many of

them are getting old now and are passing away. That organization has what they call scholarships that they give to young people who want to take aviation. That's the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., TAI.

We also have another organization which my wife and I usually go to every year, it's the NAI, the Negro Airmen, Inc. We're trying to change that word "Negro" to "National," but right now it's the Negro Airmen, Inc.

Graham: When was that begun?

Henderson: They started that in 1975. We meet at Tuskegee every Memorial Day every year.

Graham: Are those people from all the different schools, part of the Negro Airmen, Inc.?

Henderson: No. What happened, the Negro Airmen, many of the old instructors came back, something about five or six of the old instructors who were there during the beginning of our training back in the forties. We come there with them, and many of them fly their own airplanes. Some have their own airplanes.

They fly there, and we have three days of convention, I would say. We come there on Friday, and on Saturday we have different events. We have our flying eights around the airport.

Graham: So you still get up in a plane?

Henderson: [Laughter] Yeah, I get up there, too. Fly eights around the plane, and we have cross-country at Tuskegee during this one day, Memorial Day. They dispatch people to go on cross-countries and get back at a certain time. They check them out and see if they got back at the right time. Then we have balloon bursting. That is, you fly the airplane, get on one end of the runway, you fly, and somebody in the middle of the airport will release a balloon and they try to burst the balloon and fly through it. It's interesting. Sometimes they get up to try to hit the balloon, many times they burst and sometimes they don't. If the propeller doesn't hit it, you won't burst it.

Graham: A regular-size balloon?

Henderson: Yes, a regular-size balloon. Well, about that size, yes, not too large.

Graham: A foot and a half or something.

Henderson: Ordinary size. About like that, not too large. You can see it. You can see it very well--yellow balloons. We will fly and burst balloons. Then we'd have spot landings. In other words, you take off, and a certain place you're supposed to land. You cut the engine and try to land near that spot. They give prizes to the different people. On Sunday, we do the same thing. then on Sunday night, there's a banquet, and at the banquet they'll issue prizes to the person who made the best spot landing, the person who did the best cross-country, the person who did the best eights around the field. In other words, just a big affair we have.

My wife and I didn't go this year, because the main officers were all replaced, and it didn't seem to be very well organized, so my wife and I didn't go this year. We usually drive down there every year. They get at me, "Henderson, you're driving down here? You're a pilot. You're supposed to fly down here." [Laughter]

I never did own an airplane, but, you know, when I came to Columbia, I organized a flying club here in Columbia.

Graham: When was that?

Henderson: That was in the fifties. I came back from Tuskegee in 1949, and I went into the dry-cleaning business, and I worked in that. While I was in the dry-cleaning business, I took part time and went back to Benedict and got my degree.

Graham: In what?

Henderson: In commerce. Business administration, but it was commerce then.

Graham: Did you own the dry-cleaning store?

Henderson: Owned it, yeah. I bought it from my uncle. Now, the bad part about it, my uncle told me if I quit flying, he'd give me the dry-cleaning place, but I didn't believe he was going to give it to me. But then when we decided to come, he said he would sell it to me for \$1,000. I had \$1,000. He didn't know I had \$1,000. I had saved a lot of money, you see, and when I came and he saw I meant business, he said, "Let's go

into partnership together."

My parents lived in Lawrence County, not too far from Columbia. This was in Columbia on Gervay [phonetic] Street. My dad said, "No, don't go into partnership with my brother." That was my daddy's brother. He knew him, you see. "You'd better stay on your own."

So I told him I didn't want to go into partnership with him, and that made him angry. What he did, he went up on the price of the place. I went down to a Lower Main Street Bank, it's not in business now, and the man saw something in me. I was a Mason; I think you may recognize it. And he loaned me the money. He charged me \$3,000.

He gave me the check and I carried the check to my uncle, \$3,000. He looked at it. He was surprised. "I'm not going to cash it." [Laughter]

And I had moved my wife and family all the way from Tuskegee here, and he changed his mind like that. I was out on a limb then. I said, "What shall I do?"

So he played around and played around a long time, and finally he cashed that check and I was happy. So in other words, he kind of fell out with me. He told me he didn't want me to call him "Uncle" anymore. [Laughter] I had given him an

airplane clock, a big clock with airplane wings on it. He handed it back to me, "Take it back."

Graham: Why did he do all this?

Henderson: Because I wouldn't go in partnership with him. But then right after that, he organized and set up a dry-cleaning place right around the corner from me, and he had modern equipment, too. I had the fluid. You had to dip your hand in the fluid and change the filters and all that. He had the automatic. Then the secretary whom he had had for years and years, he took her and she went with him. That left me without. I was out on a limb.

But one thing I might say, the Masons in Columbia found out I was a Mason; they came to my rescue. All brought clothes to me from all over the place to clean, you see, and that's what I wanted, and that pulled me out of the hole. So I made it fine.

It wasn't too long before my uncle's health started breaking. He got sick. He had a Cadillac. He didn't want anybody to touch that Cadillac. So when he got sick, he asked me if I would drive his Cadillac to the hospital where he was. I went in. Just before he passed, he said, "If I've done

anything wrong..." That's as far as he would get. "If I've mistreated you in any way..." He wouldn't say any more, just stopped right there. I realized then he was kind of confessing. I accepted it. I was very nice to him, you know, waited on him and did what I could for him. Then after he passed, everything--he gave me an accordion, which I appreciate.

Graham: Do you know how to play?

Henderson: Yeah. [Laughter]

Graham: How did you learn how to play an accordion?

Henderson: From him. In 1936, before I went to Hampton--I went to Hampton in '37, in '36, I spent my last summer in high school days in Atlantic City with him. He was in Atlantic City.

Graham: What was he doing in Atlantic City?

Henderson: He was in Atlantic City. That's where he was living. He was a fisherman. He'd go out and fish every Sunday, come in and bring fish. He had a dry-cleaning place up there,

and that's where I learned to do dry cleaning, under him in Atlantic City in 1936. He had an accordion. I sat down and he'd show me how to play it.

Then when I went to Tuskegee--before that, I paid him for the accordion. He said he was going to give it to me, but I paid him \$50, which I appreciated. The accordion he sold me was a Marlboro-type, and I still have it, I think, in the attic. Then later he had a larger accordion, which he got to the place he couldn't play too well, so he let me have that one, too. Then there was a third accordion, which was for a lady, smaller keys; I got that one, too. I gave that one to my daughter in Charlotte. She still has it.

Graham: Does she play?

Henderson: Her husband plays. They both play a little bit when they have time. They're working so hard. He's a professor at the University of North Carolina. Charlotte, my wife, teaches school. She had to take care of the children a long time before she could start working again.

But this accordion I got from him. He had given me a watch earlier, years ago. He asked me could he get that watch back.

[Laughter] In other words, he was cutting off all communication. But after he passed, I could understand. I accepted it. Because sometimes hard knocks help you be stronger. In other words, I became strong after being treated so rough by him, because I figured that if I could make it under those conditions, I could make it. My father told me, "Don't take any chances." He knew his brother better than anybody else. He said, "When you're driving a nail, clench it." I know you know what that means. [Laughter]

Graham: What does that mean?

Henderson: When you drive a nail into a board, the head is still there; you can throw it out. You take a chisel and hit it again, below the surface, but you can't draw it out. That's what he meant by clenching it. When you're driving a nail, clench it. I knew that from my childhood. When you're driving boards, drive a nail in here. You can draw it out as long as the head's there. But if you knock the head below the surface, there's no way to get it out unless you tear up the wood.

Graham: So was your father saying--

Henderson: He was saying, Don't take any chances. Anything I make with him, make sure that everything's above board. Don't let him pull any wool over my eyes. Don't let him do anything. And if you make a deal with him, make sure of what you want and what yo want to do.

Graham: Where was your father's family from?

Henderson: They were from Lawrence County, all right there where I grew up. My father had another brother, George. He lived across here just down below Lawrence, and my Uncle John, the one that I got the dry-cleaners from, he went off on his own, went to Atlantic City and different places. He had a place here in Columbia for a long time. He had something like a nightclub or something. Then he went to Atlantic City, and that's where he stayed for a long time.

Graham: Did he play in a band?

Henderson: No, no, just sitting down and playing. That's about the only thing I did for a long time, but when I went to

Tuskegee, I started playing in the church. When the pastor first opened the service, there's a place where they have a place for soft music. I played the accordion for soft music in the church, and I used it in church quite a bit. I played quite a bit around Columbia.

My daughter sings; she's an opera singer. She's singing opera. She was in Germany, singing opera in Germany for about eight years, and she came back and she taught at St. Louis for about six years. Then she got a better job at Cincinnati. She is a professor of voice at--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Henderson: It's some of the men who fought overseas. They destroyed 111 aircraft in the air and 150 aircraft on the ground. They destroyed 16 barges and boats, 58 boxcars of rolling stock, 1 destroyer. They destroyed one destroyer, 15 horse-drawn vehicles, 6 border transports, 3 power transformers, 58 locomotives, and 1 radar installation.

The Tuskegee men who were flying, I mentioned the missions and the sorties. The mission is what you're told to do. The exact was 1,578 missions that they flew, and 15,533 total

sorties. The number of pilots we sent overseas was 450; 450 were sent overseas. Nine hundred and ninety two graduated from Tuskegee and 66 killed in action.

I have here awards to be received, the men who went overseas. Do you want those?

Graham: What kinds of awards?

Henderson: One is the Legion of Merit Award; 1 Silver Star; 2 Soldier Medals; 8 Purple Hearts; 95 Distinguished Flying Crosses; 14 Bronze Stars; and 744 Air Medal and Clusters. It says here, "The final total of Distinguished Flying Crosses awarded to Negro pilots is estimated at 150."

Graham: What is the top award?

Henderson: That Purple Heart, the person is killed. I guess that's the greatest sacrificial one of all.

Graham: So as far as flying ability, that was the Flying Cross?

Henderson: Yes, Distinguished Flying Cross. That's for doing

exceptional work in the air.

Graham: Where were the different areas like the Italian area, that they had a mission?

Henderson: They landed at Casablanca, over there, but they operated from another flying school. I was looking at that the other day. It was not too far from where they landed. When they got to Casablanca, it took them some time to get to the other places where they would operate from, and they operated with the 27th Fighter Bomber Group. A little place where they operated from was Veeden [phonetic]. That's where they operated from when they were escorting the bombers.

Later on, when they occupied some parts of Italy, they had a base over on the land of Italy, where they operated from. At first, you see, Italy was enemy territory, and when they occupied Italy, the pilots were based there.

Graham: Was that the base when they were going to Germany?

Henderson: Yes, and come back to the base in Italy. Here's one thing they always say. A bomber pilot took off, to carry bombs,

he knew that those black pursuit pilots had made a very good reputation for escorting the bombers, and when he took off on the bomber and looked out on the right and saw a red-tailed plane, looked to the left and saw a red-tailed plane, looked up and saw a red-tailed plane, he would get on the comm and say, "All crew members, have no fear, the 99th is here." [Laughter]

Then he would fly on to target and drop those hot pancakes and turn and come back to the home base. Hot pancakes are the bombs, you know. So the bomber pilots were really proud when they'd look out and see those pursuit planes escorting them, because they did not turn back.

Sometimes ground fighting from the enemy would send up flak into the air, you know, to hurt the planes that were flying over, but this fight during turn these pilots back. I understand that some of the other pilots, when that flak started getting too thick, they would layer those bombers and go out to where it was clear, and then when the bombers turned to go back home, they would come back and get in formation with them as if they had protected the bombers all the way. But our men didn't do that; they stayed with those bombers all the way out and all the way back, because they had a job to do and they did it.

Graham: Were there any black bomber pilots in the European theater?

Henderson: No, no, they didn't get any black ones in there. They were training them, getting them ready for it in the B-25s, and when the war came to an end, they did not get a chance to go in as bomber pilots in the European theater.

Graham: You mentioned the black pilot who was in the Pacific, that his size was--

Henderson: Yes, he was very large. See, those pursuit planes had a kind of small cockpit, because I think they had a limitation on your size when you first went in the Air Corps-- height, weight, size, and everything. If you were too large in here, you might be too wide for the cockpit. The cockpit is where you sit, you know. Of course, he was very large, so he went into the bomber flying, and he liked it.

Graham: Do you remember where you had to keep your weight?

Henderson: Well, they didn't say too much about your weight.

The biggest thing, they were concerned about your health. You had to have 20/20 eyes, good hearing, and your depth perception had to be very good. Depth perception--in other words, they had two pegs a distance from you, and a string tied to another peg you could slide forward and backwards. You do that, you slide them 'til you get this peg directly opposite that one. That's how they'd test your depth perception.

Graham: How often did they do that?

Henderson: They did that when we first went into the Air Corps, and I think they did it once or twice after we got into it, to see if our depth perception was still good. But I do remember very vividly trying to get those things lined up. If you had good eye vision, 20/20, you could do it pretty good. Of course, on the same level, sometimes as far as from here to the dining room table, going through kind of a dark area, then that's in the light, and you can pull one forward or back, and you work it 'til you get them side by side with a string, you see. That's the depth perception that you had to have.

Also, in flying--I didn't mention this--we had to do a radius-of-action problems. Radius of action is to fly from one

point to another point as far as you can go, and turn around and get back to your own base with a half hour of flying fuel, not over a half hour of flying fuel. If you'd go out there too far, you couldn't get back. If you come back too long, you'd have too much fuel when you'd get back. That's the radius of action.

That's to the same base, coming back to the same base you started off from. Radius of action to the same base.

We also had radius of action to the alternate base--fly as far from Tuskegee to Chattanooga, Tennessee, as far as you can go, but turn at a point where you come back, come back to Atlanta, and land at Atlanta with a half-hour's fuel. We had to figure all that out before we'd go, because we had to figure the air conditions, the air directions, the wind velocity, and everything.

Because, you see, when you're flying an airplane, we planned our flight before we'd leave the ground. If you're supposed to be flying 350 degrees in no wind, you can fly 350 degrees; it'll take you there. If you have the rain coming in from the left, you've got to correct the airplane to the left, which is about ten degrees, or depends on the strength of the wind, and you're actually flying slightly sideways. If the wind is from your right, you had to correct your plane to the right

and get your heading and you're flying sideways.

Now, if the wind is in front, if you're flying at 200 miles an hour and the wind is facing you, and the wind is 20 miles an hour, you're not doing but 180 miles an hour, because 20 miles-an-hour wind is holding you back. If you have the wind behind you 20 miles an hour and you're flying 200 miles an hour, you're actually going 220 miles an hour, because the wind behind you is carrying you 20 miles faster. It all has to be figured in on your flight plan before you leave, if you're going to be flying straight or if you're going to have a wind correction.

Sometimes the wind changed from what it was before you go, because you get what is called the winds aloft. Winds aloft is the winds above you. Of course, if you're going to fly at 3,000 feet, you find out from the weather station what is the wind at 3,000 feet. They might say the wind is coming from 15 degrees at 10 miles an hour. On your chart you would make a correction, 10 degrees maybe to the right to face the wind. So you when you take off, you're flying right. But if you get up there with that heading and find that you're not going straight on the part that you want, then you've got to make a correction. If you get off to the left, the wind is stronger and you've got to make more of a correction. In other words, you just have to correct

as you go.

That is done during the contact flight. What you call contact flight and instrument flight, contact flight is when you can see the ground, you see everything all the time--the ground, railroads, telephone lines on the ground. You see the path of the telephone lines; you can't see the wire itself, but you can tell where there's a telephone line because of the path through the trees. Of course, you wouldn't want to land anywhere you'd cross that. That's contact flight.

Now, instrument flight is when you're in the clouds and you can't see anything but your instruments. Of course, when you're doing contact flying, you're not supposed to fly when the clouds are lower than, say, usually 1,000 feet, because if you get up to 1,000 feet and get in the clouds, you're not high enough above the ground to fly safely, you see. So you shouldn't fly contact flight at 500 feet, because 500 feet is very close to the ground. If you're coming down to the ground at 500 feet, you don't have much space for turning if you have to turn. So instrument flight is if at any time the clouds are below 500 feet--instrument flight.

Graham: What about physics and geometry? Did you have to take

all those courses?

Henderson: Yes, when we went to Tuskegee, we took physics and we had math. They gave us a great deal of math at Tuskegee. I remember our math teacher, he was very short in stature. We called him "Square Root." [Laughter] He was so short, but he was good. Yeah, he was good. "Square Root." He gave us some calculus, logarithms, and there's another course in there. What is that course in math? I know calculus and logarithms. I may think of the other one later. In other words, we had that at Tuskegee.

We also had to be taught instruments, engine, and aircraft. We learned so much about the aircraft engine. In other words, we had to almost be able to almost build an engine, we knew that much about the engine and the aircraft itself.

The aircraft that we flew were fabric, fabricated. In other words, an airplane wing was struts of wood covered by a cloth, and on that cloth, you would treat it with dope. Dope makes it tough. Then shellac on top of it. When you touch it, it feels like tin, almost, very strong, but it's just cloth covered with shellac and then with all this covering that covers it up.

Graham: That's what the planes were?

Henderson: When we started, they were smaller planes. The Wacos were that way, and the Stensons, too, the PT-13. That's cloth covered with dope.

Graham: What is dope?

Henderson: Dope is something like very thick solution, looks almost like a mud, but it's not thick enough to clog like mud. They call it dope. They dope it up real good and that dope kind of stretches the cloth, makes it tight. Then on top of that, they put shellac, like you have on furniture. Shellac makes it slick, and that makes it so the wind will go over it very smooth. Yeah, that plane was made that same way, struts and things.

The other planes are made out of metal, the larger planes, the P-40s and all those, and the P-51s, I'm sure.

Graham: What did Mildred Hanson and Mildred Henson do after they left being pilots?

Henderson: They didn't go very far and became pilots. I think Mildred Hanson received her private license, I believe, and Mildred Henson, I think she started a family and she couldn't continue. Yeah, we were proud of those two young ladies who were a part of us out there.

Graham: What were their goals?

Henderson: I think, more or less, pleasure, because they may have had insights to becoming cadets, but, you see, at that time no females were flying in the Air Force, so I don't think they had any mind at all. Just flying more or less for pleasure. They did very well, too. Mildred Hanson, I remember she was tall and slender. Hanson was real short and a little bit chubby. I knew those two very well.

Graham: What was the reaction when you came back as a pilot and an instructor, when you came back to your home community?

Henderson: Oh, boy. [Laughter] They really were excited. The main excitement was when I went to Hampton Institute. See, I

was at Hampton Institute for three years before I went into the Air Corps. When I came home from Hampton, had on my Hampton uniform, most of them thought it was the Army uniform. I'd meet some of those white cadets, white people, and they'd salute me.

[Laughter] I was just a student.

Graham: Did you salute back?

Henderson: Yeah! I've give it back to them just as straight as I could. [Laughter] Yes, sir. But I was actually an officer in the ROTC, and that was very nice. That's when the people back home was most excited, just to see that uniform. See, black people didn't wear uniforms in those days. Very few were in the Army, and here I was in the Air Corps. No, I was at Hampton. I was not in the Air Corps. But I had on a uniform and our uniforms were olive drab color and some kind of a light trousers, which was very dressy. We had our Sam Brown. Have you heard of Sam Brown?

Henderson: A shoe? What is that?

Henderson: That's a belt coming across your shoulder and around

your waist. A belt that comes across your waist and a strap over your shoulder. That's a Sam Brown, we call it. And, of course, on your left side was a place to carry a sword, because, you see, we didn't have guns at Hampton. We were Junior ROTC. Had swords on the left side.

Graham: Did you have your sword there?

Henderson: We didn't carry swords too much, you know, except when we were drilling. Sometimes when we were drilling, we'd have the sword. But, you see, the Sam Brown, we were proud of that Sam Brown. Tied it around your waist, it came over your shoulder and on your left side, had support for your holster, you might say. And, of course, when we left that and went to the regular Army flying suits, then we were like warrant officers.

When I came back home, then as a pilot, many of the young people my age, we were out, I didn't see them very much, they were farmers, working saw mills, friends that I was classmates with in elementary school, or wrestling or fighting, they fell by the wayside, just dropped out of school and everything, and I continued.

Graham: How did they see you?

Henderson: Well, they kind of respected me. They didn't have too much resentment, but they could know that they had lost something by dropping out and me going on. Of course, we were friendly. They were friendly. But I didn't come in contact with them too much, because when I came home, my biggest aim in coming home was to see my parents and see my cousins, but my playmates and classmates, they were kind of scattered. I didn't get a chance to see them too much. But my cousins and my uncles and my aunts, they were very proud. My Uncle John, the one that treated me so bad, he was proud of me at the time. [Laughter]

So they saw me as someone who was kind of unusual, you see. I didn't see myself as unusual. In fact, when I was doing these things, I had no idea, no thoughts of praise or honor or anything; I was given a job to do when I was in the Air Corps, and I did it. But since that time, many things have come up. Articles in the papers come out about me.

About three weeks ago, *Greenville News* had me in there, and you heard so much about D-Day here about three or four weeks ago. They had me on the page with the rest of the D-Day,

showing me as a pilot, you see. I was not in the D-Day action going into Normandy, but I was a pilot with the fighting force at the same time.

Graham: Were you serving in the Army on the stateside as an instructor?

Henderson: I was an instructor.

Graham: Who was Sam Brown?

Henderson: That was a belt. [Laughter]

Graham: Do you know why it's called a Sam Brown?

Henderson: You know, I really think the first man that wore one of those, I believe his name was Sam Brown. We felt it was an honor to reach that stage to wear a Sam Brown. [Laughter] Yes, sir.

Graham: When did you become a Mason?

Henderson: I joined the Masons in 1946, in Tuskegee. Of course, first you had to become what they call a Blue Lodge member, the first three degrees. That's the basic first three degrees. Then after I stayed there for about three or four years, I moved up to the Consistory, which was the 32nd degree Masons. Then I moved up to the Shriners, which is the playhouse of Masons. I was in the Shriners for a while.

Graham: How long were you in that group?

Henderson: During the whole time I was in Tuskegee. After '46, I joined; I think '47, I became a Consistory man and a Shriner. I was fully active in that during that time. When I came to Columbia, I made my last step; I got to 33rd degree.

Graham: And that's the rank?

Henderson: Yes, 33rd degree. It's really more than a rank, it's a symbol of what we are. Of course, 33rd degree Masons, we meet once a year. We meet in Washington every other year. I think we're going to Washington this year. We went to St. Louis and Tennessee and back to Washington.

Graham: Is that the farthest you can go?

Henderson: The 33rd, as far as you can go.

Graham: What do you do today in the Masons?

Henderson: Right now I'm a past commander-in-chief of the Consistory. Of course, I mentioned before, I am a past master in the lodge; that's first.

Graham: Were you a master of the lodge here in Columbia?

Henderson: In Columbia. Master of the lodge first. After I became master, I became past master of the lodge. In the Consistory, I was commander-in-chief. When somebody else was elected, I became the past commander-in-chief. Then I also became the deputy for the state of South Carolina, the whole state of South Carolina, deputy. In other words, I would overlook all the lodges. I'd go from Anderson, Spartenburg, Charleston, all over, visiting. My wife would go with me.

Graham: Is she in Eastern Star?

Henderson: Eastern Star, yes. She's in Eastern Star and I'm in Masons.

Graham: When did she become a member of the Eastern Star?

Henderson: Oh, boy. Must have been back in the fifties. I think she became Eastern Star before we came to Columbia. It must be in 1950. I can find out specifically.

Graham: Was she a member back in Tuskegee?

Henderson: I don't think she joined Eastern Star in Tuskegee, but I do remember here she became a member. When I became a Shriner, she became a Daughter of Isis. Those are wives of Shriners. Eastern Star are wives of Masons, and the Daughters of Isis are the wives of Shriners.

Graham: When you were a Mason in '46, were there white Mason groups and black Mason groups?

Henderson: Right. They're not together yet.

Graham: Are they together now?

Henderson: No.

Graham: Still separate?

Henderson: Still separate. Still separate. Now, sometimes they have conversations with each other, talk to each other, but they don't go into too much detail, you know. I think all the secrets and things are the same, generally the same. What happened, the blacks tried to get into the Masonic organization way back in the time of the Civil--well, no, after that, because Prince Hall [phonetic] was the first man to get us in. We tried to get in here; they wouldn't let us in. So a black man, Prince Hall, went to England, and the Grand Lodge of England granted a charter to the black Masons.

Graham: Is that how they started?

Henderson: Yes, and he brought it back and then he organized

other black Masonic lodges. We had to go over there to more or less get organized.

Graham: When did the black Masons start?

Henderson: I believe that was after the Civil War, either the Civil War or the war in the country. When I was a Consistory, the wives of the Consistory men are Golden Circle, but my wife didn't join the Golden Circle. She didn't join that organization.

Graham: What about the flying group that you started when you came to Columbia?

Henderson: When I came to Columbia, I organized a flying group out of Owens Field, and we did not own an airplane. The name of the club was the Black Eagles, I called them. Black Eagles. We had about eight persons who were part of that flying group. I remember the names of many of them--Dennis Frazier [phonetic], Pendergrass, Dr. Jenkins, one or two more doctors.

Graham: What kind of doctors were they?

Henderson: Dentists. We would go out, and James Langley, he was a construction man, he's still living, he lives not far from me.

Graham: How did he become active? Was he flying?

Henderson: Flying. All of them learned to fly. So what we did, we would go to the airport, and I would rent the plane, see. I was the only one who had the authority to rent a plane because I had my license. They would rent a plane to me, and I would take them up and give them flight instructions and come back, and they would pay for the expense of the plane. I didn't charge anything for my teaching; I was just anxious to promote aviation. I would fly them. Langley would fly, Jenkins would fly. Of course, they talked of buying an airplane. If we had bought an airplane, we could have continued on and on, but not having an airplane, we would have to just go out and rent a plane at the time they had one available. If they didn't have one available, we would have to wait for it.

One man I taught to fly, he's still living. He lives right over here about a mile from me. He's very tall, very exact,

wants to do everything just so. He retired some time ago. He was on the commission at the Metropolitan Airport. I'm on a commission at Owens Field in Columbia, Richland County Airport. I'm an airport commissioner there.

Graham: What do you do as the airport commissioner?

Henderson: We try to advise the county council as to the best thing to do about the airport. In other words, if we needed to add planes, we would discuss it with them. If the ground needs repairing, we would discuss it with them. If the hangars were leaking, we would let them know that so it could be repaired. We were just a commission to work between the county council and the airport. That's the way I work with them.

Graham: Back to your neighbor, the man you taught how to fly, who was very exact.

Henderson: Yes. I would tease him. He retired from the commission about three or four weeks ago. Each of us who knew him got to make some remarks, so when I mentioned his name, Pendergrass, I said, "The only thing I was concerned, when I was

teaching Pendergrass, he was so exact and wanted to do things so strictly, that I thought when I got ready to take him up, he was going to drag with one foot on the ground while the airplane was flying so he could keep in contact with the ground." [Laughter]

That was just a joke on him. He was all right.

Oh, yes. In 1991, I was called and asked if I would be interested in applying. Well, they wanted to induct me into the Hall of Fame, so November 1991, I was inducted into the first South Carolina Aviation Hall of Fame.

Graham: That's fantastic.

Henderson: The first Hall of Fame they had, and I was inducted into it along with several others. Several of them had passed; they were dead. Only one other was living, one lady, Mrs. Frances, the other [unclear]'s wife. She was a flight instructor. Of course, most of the interest came on me, I guess because I was black. [Laughter] And I had done so much more. You see, I had taught men how to fly at Tuskegee, and this other lady just taught people to fly around the airport here in Columbia. But, see, I had gone further. I had served my country as well as my state, so they really played me up.

I have a lot of pictures of that when they gave me the plaque and inducted me into the South Carolina Aviation Hall of Fame. They put it on the wall at the Columbia Municipal Airport. It's on a wall out there now. And several others have come in since then, but mine is at the top, still at the top. They made a replica of it, another one, and put it at the airport where I'm a commissioner at Owens Field; there's one on the wall out there, Aviation Hall of Fame.

Then later on, they had what is called here in Columbia 100 black men who are outstanding, and I was named one of the 100 black men, and I was given the Black Hall of Fame. I was inducted into the Black Hall of Fame.

Graham: Is that national?

Henderson: No, Black Hall of Fame is--it might be national, but most of it is around the South. That's the only place I've heard it. Black Hall of Fame. I don't consider that near as important as the Aviation Hall of Fame, because the Aviation Hall of Fame is national. Well, of course, it's South Carolina Hall of Fame, but it is something that's unusual in aviation.

Graham: The 100 black men, what kind of organization is that?

Henderson: That's an organization here that usually consists of 100 black men who try to promote quality among our race and promote young people in getting a better education, just promoting anything that they can that will enhance our race, to try to be better. I don't know why they call it the 100. I'm sure they have more than that now, because they're adding men to it every year. But they call it 100 black men. I don't know if it's Columbia or what, or the state or something. They issue a Black Hall of Fame.

I think I saw one writing of that before they made me-- Charles Bolling [phonetic], who is the astronaut. They made him, I think, a Hall of Fame.

Back in 1985, our senator from South Carolina, the one whose child was killed, whose daughter was run over by a car back here last year, Senator Strom Thurmond--

Graham: Who's been there forever.

Henderson: [Laughter] Been there forever and will be there as long as he can. I will say one thing. He interceded and got me

into the *Congressional Record* in Washington, D.C.

Graham: How did he do that?

Henderson: [Laughter] What happened, a young lady from the University of North Carolina, I can't think of her name now, she heard about my flying. She asked me if she could interview me, just like you're doing. She came over and interviewed me, and she wrote an article in the "Neighbor" section of the state paper, just about my whole life in there and about my flying, too. Of course, they also wrote that I didn't drink strong drinks and everything, and I was called "The Pride of the Primary at Tuskegee." In addition to being "Ace," they called me "The Pride of the Primary."

Graham: Who called you that?

Henderson: The people around Tuskegee. [Laughter] They just had that much respect for me. When this came out in the paper there, I think our senator saw it and saw what a great write-up it was about a black man fighting in World War II. He recommended it go into the *Congressional Record*, and so it's in

the *Congressional Record* and I have a copy of it in the attic, about my whole life history.

Then since that, about this spring, [James E.] Clyburn, who is our representative in South Congress, he wrote an excerpt to go to the *Congressional Record* and he said this, "Long before Charles Bolling and Ronald McNair, long before they were born, Henderson was making a record in Tuskegee, Alabama." See, I was back in 1942, and they were born way since then. Clyburn put that into the *Congressional Record*. "Long before Bolling and McNair were born, Henderson was serving his country in Tuskegee, Alabama." I'm going to write him a letter of thanks for that.

Graham: That's something to be thankful about.

Henderson: Yes, because he thought about me in that respect. Of course, I have done that.

Graham: When and where were you born?

Henderson: I was born in 1917. I'm 77 years old. Had a birthday this year.

Graham: When's your birthday?

Henderson: February 22, same as George Washington. George Washington was lucky to be born on my birthday. [Laughter]

Graham: Was that in Lawrence?

Henderson: Lawrence County, on the farm, right there. That's where I grew up. Used to pick cotton on the wagon, take it to the gin.

Graham: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Henderson: Yes, ten in the family. Eight children; five girls, three boys.

Graham: What are their names?

Henderson: My oldest brother's name is Earl Henderson. Next was Bertha Henderson. Next was Ola C. Henderson. Next one was Lewis Henderson. Then Ernest Henderson.

Graham: You were the fifth?

Henderson: Fifth. Then Ethel Henderson, a girl, and the boy is a boy, George Henderson. That's just seven.

Graham: That's just seven.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 2]

Graham: So what did your parents think when you took them up in a plane?

Henderson: Well, when I went to Lawrence, I told them that I was coming, so when I got near my hometown, there's a big tower down there, a forest tower. I flew pretty low over the tower and had to fly down low over my farm, where my father lived. I had written on there, "Ernest, come pick me up in Lawrence." It's Lawrence County that we live in. Lawrence is about ten miles from that. So I dropped a piece of paper. He picked it up and read it. He gave him a Masonic sign. [Laughter] Then he got in the car and came to Lawrence, and he brought the children, the family, with him.

While we were there, I took him up. I took my sister Ethel up in the plane. I think I took my brother George up for a flight and came down. I think I took Bertha up for a flight and came down. Then I got back on the ground, my daddy came out and went up with me, took a flight. I said, "I know my mama's not going." We came back down and we landed. We got there, and my mama was walking out to the plane to fly, too. I said, "Lookie here!" I had to be careful not to get in the way of the propeller, you see. That's a dangerous thing; the propeller will turn you over. They brought her behind and she got into the airplane, fastened the seatbelt, closed the door, and took off. I said, "If I ever flew an airplane smooth, I've got to do it today, because I've got Mama in here."

So I took off and flew her up, flew out over the city just a little bit. I didn't keep her long. I came on around, came in to make my landing. I had throttled back. She heard me throttling back the engine, getting low. Before I got to the ground, she said, "Ernest, that was a good flight." I thought to myself, "You'd better wait 'til I hit this ground."

[Laughter] I hadn't landed. So I came on down and made a very smooth landing. I was really surprised that she went with me, but she did go.

Graham: What year was that?

Henderson: That must have been back in 1946, I believe. Yeah, right after I got married.

Graham: What year did you get married?

Henderson: In 1945. Next year will be the fiftieth anniversary.

Graham: That's fantastic. Fifty years. You don't hear about that anymore. Marriages dissolve.

Henderson: How about that.

Graham: What about the first church you were a member of?

Henderson: The first church I remember was New Hope AME Church. I remember that so well.

Graham: What do you remember about it?

Henderson: I remember my superintendent there. His name was Rance Fowler. One of his children is still living today. My pastor was Reverend East, the pastor's name. I remember we had 1_____ then over the people; they didn't have deacons in the AME church. We had ladies. My 1____ was named Daniel Adams.

Graham: Daniel?

Henderson: Daniel Adams. Yes, sir. I remember every month I had to give him 25 cents to send to Allen [phonetic] University. The Methodist Church supports Allen University, you know. My mother and father both were members of the choir there. He was lead, and my mother was an alto.

Graham: Allen University, that's here?

Henderson: Yes, in Columbia. It's a Methodist school here. It's just barely surviving. It's very, very weak. Benedict-- you've heard of Benedict. I graduated from Benedict. It's a nice school. It's doing fairly well. Changed presidents this time, but they're doing well. Allen is very poor.

Graham: When did you go to Benedict? Before Hampton?

Henderson: I went to Benedict after I came from Tuskegee. I came from Tuskegee in 1949 and went into the dry-cleaning business, which I operated for about ten years. I started going to Benedict in 1946. What happened, my wife was teaching, and she convinced me to take the NTE, the National Teachers Examination, just to see what I would do. I was not going to school. I took it and made an A, the first time I took it, so that's when I decided to go back to Benedict. So I started going to Benedict in 1946. I would go only about one period a day in '47, '48--I'm sorry, I'm talking about the forties. The fifties. In the fifties. '56, '57, '58, and I graduated in 1959.

Graham: What was the degree?

Henderson: Commerce. As soon as I got my degree, one of my friends, who was a principal of a school, started a new school that same year I graduated, called Fairwold Middle School. That's where I started teaching, as soon as I graduated.

Graham: You started teaching what subject?

Henderson: English and social studies. Not commerce.

Graham: So you were a teacher of English and social studies at what school?

Henderson: Fairwold Middle School.

Graham: That's in Columbia?

Henderson: Columbia. I was also the book room manager the first year, and I became the business manager the second year, still teaching. I became a counselor the third year, still teaching.

Graham: So you were there from 1959 to when?

Henderson: 1964, when I started. After that, I became assistant principal. In 1960, I think, I became assistant principal, and I was assistant principal there at Fairwold until

1978. Then they asked me if I wouldn't mind going to another school that had a white principal. They had integrated then. A white principal and a black assistant, but the black assistant was going to another school to be principal, and they needed someone there as assistant principal. So they asked me if I would consider the change, so I changed and went to another school called Crayton Middle School and was assistant principal there from '78 to 1982. That's when I retired.

Graham: Did you miss flying during all this period?

Henderson: Yeah. I stopped flying about the latter part of the 1960s, because what happened, when I became assistant principal, I was put in charge of discipline, and you know what that's like. I was in charge of discipline, so that took most all of my time. Another thing, we had three children in college, and I had to work at night. I taught bookkeeping. That was part of my line, you see, because I took commerce. I taught bookkeeping at night at one of the high schools for a while and then to another high school, Booker T. Washington High School. Then C.A. Johnson High School, I taught typing. That took most of my time.

When I was doing that night work and day work, that was when I had to give up--earlier in your writing, I was the deputy of the state of South Carolina, I had to give that up, too, because of my business and because I was doing night work, too.

I also had to kind of lay off on my flying and couldn't do much flying then.

As soon as I retired, I started working with the Council on Aging. I'm doing that now and deliver Meals on Wheels. Back about three years ago, I had a heat problem with the sun. I was cutting grass and I passed out. Of course, they say it was a heatstroke, and I guess it was, because I didn't know what was happening. The last thing I remember, I was cutting grass. I have a business up on Gervay Street, and behind it is a large area. I was cutting the grass like this, cutting the grass.

[End of recording]