

**Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project
National Park Service**

Excerpt of Interview with: R.G.
Interviewed by: L.B.
Location: _____, Florida
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Transcribed by: Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft; March 2004
Edited by:

[Tape 1, Side A.]

L.B.: Today is January 27th, 2004. This is Dr. L.B. with the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project for the U.S. National Park Service. I'm here in _____, Florida, with Mr. R.G., who was in the 332nd [Fighter Group] at Lockbourne [Army Air Base, Ohio] and was the first black flight engineer in the U.S. Air Force. We will talk more about that.

Mr. G, thank you very much for agreeing to do the interview. To begin, if you could tell me about your childhood, including your date of birth.

R.G.: Good morning, Dr. B.

L.B.: Good morning.

R.G.: My entire name is R.B.G. I was born February the 10th, 1930. My parents were R.H.G., and my mother was W____; H____ was her maiden name. There's a peculiarity about situations back during 1930. I happen to have my birth certificate here, and I'd like you to look at the occupation of my father. He's listed as—

L.B.: As a houseman.

R.G.: As a houseman. [Chuckles.] He migrated from Virginia to New Jersey, seeking better employment, and the description of his job was working in janitorial service at Princeton University and the Hunt School, which had an awful lot to do with my life. Working there, of course, he was able to pick up discarded periodicals—*Life* magazine, *Look* magazine, *National Geographic*. He was able to pick up a discarded tennis racquet, ice skates and other things that people of my ethnic background may not have been exposed to. Really, I count Princeton University, even though it was impossible to attend in those years, as part of my education, by just going over to the campus. I ice skated on their hockey rink; I swam in their pool, I went to all the museums. I didn't know I was doing it, but sometimes I'd walk into a big classroom, and I'd sit in the back. I'm really auditing the class, not realizing what was happening at the time.

L.B.: So you never had any problems in the pool or in the hockey—were you a very young child then or this is up through high school years?

R.G.: I was very young, and it was just something that I was part of the program because my father worked there, so therefore I was accepted.

My mother, even though, God bless her soul, she never admitted it, but she was sort of a maid. My grandparents were sharecroppers, even though they never used the term that they were sharecroppers. For the early part of my life, we lived on a farm. There was a sharecropper house. But my mother and father lived in the main house with me because my mother was a

servant to this doctor, who owned the farm, and my father was—besides working at Princeton University, he was also a chauffeur for the doctor during his spare time.

So they enrolled me in school in 1935. There were no black schools in this area, so in kindergarten, myself and three others were the only blacks in a class of about, I guess, twenty-two, twenty-three. It made our life a little bit different. Again, I was exposed to some things that perhaps others of my ethnic background were not.

We moved close to Princeton. The jobs changed for my parents. World War II came along, and to make a long story very short, in grammar school I was the only black until the eighth grade, the grammar school that I attended in the little town of Rocky Hill, New Jersey. But there was an airport there, and I had a lot of interest as a youngster in aviation. I began to build model airplanes, I began to hang around the airport, and the other white boys that I associated with—they were in the model building and—again, this is part of my education. I began to learn aerodynamics even though I didn't realize this.

So I went on to high school, and I took a job at this little airport, working part time, washing windshields on the airplanes, pumping gas, assisting the mechanics, and for this, they used to give me thirty minutes of pilot training a week, and a couple of dollars. So I really developed an interest in flying.

Well, in about the eleventh grade—financially we weren't doing very well at all after the war, but about the eleventh grade, I made a decision which in one way I might say it's good and in another way it may have been a mistake. I decided to leave school in the eleventh grade and go in to the Air Force to become a pilot. My parents—my father only went to the fourth grade; my mother had a high school education, and they really couldn't advise me what I needed academically. During my young life, there wasn't even much conversation about attending

college. I think once my mother mentioned Hampton Institute, but they didn't have the money or it wasn't—no pressure.

But anyway, in the Air Force, when I joined the Air Force, I took the exams and they were rather amazed because I scored very high on the AGCT [Army General Classification Test] score, and really a made scores high enough to go to pilot training. But it was after the war, and they were toning down the service, and they could not figure how they could waiver all the educational requirements and so forth to get me into pilot training.

But they did realize that I had an aptitude for aviation in general, so it ended up that I went to mechanics school. They call it aircraft and engine mechanic. I went to Biloxi, Mississippi. This is my first exposure south after going to an all-white school [chuckles], in a town that was semi-segregated. But my mother and father really kind of protected me from it. You know, I didn't realize the full impact of how this nation was until I joined the service.

Graduating from mechanics school in Biloxi, Mississippi, they didn't know what to do with me, so they sent me to Kelly Air Force Base in Texas, and it started out that I was cutting grass, trimming hedges around officers' houses. But then they decided, after I'd written a couple of letters and my mother, assisted by someone she worked for, politically, letters were sent to the commander to have me work in the skills that I was trained for. So they put me in this depot, and I worked on airplanes, and they were absolutely amazed because I had had pilot training, so we were working on trainers, TC-6s [sic; AT-6s], and I was on the very end of the production line, we'll call it. It's where we really overhauled the airplanes.

But they were amazed to see this little black boy—and these were all civilians in this depot—get in this big airplane, start it up and taxi it out and pull all the checks that were

required. This was quite a show to them. They just couldn't believe it. Plus I didn't have the accent that they were accustomed to.

Eventually—well, a short time later they decided that they would send me to Lockbourne Air Force Base, and I joined the 332nd as a mechanic, and I was there the year of 1948, working as a mechanic, improving my mechanical skills and learning more about airplanes. However, the Air Force decided to integrate, and when they integrated, I was one of the first from Lockbourne—I was sent to Germany to the Berlin airlift. I was at the Rhein-Main Air Force Base, and I worked as a mechanic on the dock, doing deep maintenance on these C-54s. But at night I would volunteer just to ride along with the crews to fly from Rhein-Main to Tempelhof, which is Berlin, with a load of coal or whatever we were carrying.

But strange as it may seem, some of the people that I worked for at this Princeton airport—they were Reservists, and they had been recalled into service, and some of them were the same pilots that were assigned to the Berlin airlift. So I got to do some of the jobs of flight mechanic, which is to help start the engines and run the engines up, help the pilot fly the airplane.

One night this flight mechanic did not show up, and so one of the pilots said, "We know BG there. We knew him from back home. Why don't we take him?" [Laughs.] So that's how this flight engineer business started. I flew as a flight mechanic for a few weeks, and then they decided, "Well, we'll send him back to the United States and send him to flight engineer school." Little did I know at that time that I was the first applicant to attend the flight engineer school at Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois.

Well, things went along pretty well, except there were two instructors, the chief instructor and one other instructor decided that there was no black flight engineers and there were not

going to be any. [Laughs.] So I consistently failed. Everything I did, it would come back zero. So I was about to be dismissed from the class. I went up before the board, the academic board. I said, "I just got one request. Can I take the final exam here in this room?" And I took the final exam, and I think I made a 3.8.

So I graduated from the class, went to Randolph [Air Force Base, Texas], and by that time the Korean War was hot. I did pretty well as a flight engineer, so they decided to keep me at Randolph as an instructor, so I flew maybe 2,000 hours as an instructor at Randolph Air Force Base, instructing. And never had any problems, color problems because most of the students were white. I can almost name all the flight engineers that came behind me because there were so few of us, just like the pilots.

So anyway, after that, they decided to send me to KC-97 school, which is a Boeing 377, and its job is to refuel other airplanes in flight, one of the most hazardous things that you can do. So I trained and successfully completed the training and was assigned to MacDill Air Force Base [Florida], and then from MacDill Air Force Base I went to several other bases, training other crews. I was always either on a training crew or a standardization crew. In fact, we helped introduce this airplane to the entire Air Force. And I did that for thirteen years, with a total flying time doing that of about 6,500 hours.

Anyway, finally the jet era came along, so I applied for and was accepted to go to jet transport training. [Gets up to close door to block out sound of voices.] They sent me to New Jersey. They sent me back to McGuire Air Force Base, which was very close to my hometown, where I started out. Now the Vietnam War was really, really going. So my assignments were to fly from McGuire Air Force Base out to California to Wake Island and then from there down to

Okinawa or either the Philippines and, depending on our load, we would go into Vietnam. We'd

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