



5-27-2009

## Nesbitt, Robert

Bronx African American History Project  
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### Recommended Citation

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Interviewee: Robert Nesbitt

Interviewers: Dr. Oneka LaBennett and Dr. Claude Mangum

Date: May 27, 2009

Dr. Oneka LaBennett (OL): Today is May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009 and we're conducting a Bronx African American History Project oral history interview at Fordham University. The interviewers are Dr. Claude Mangum and Dr. Oneka LaBennett, the videographer is Dawn Russell and today we are interviewing Mr. Robert Nesbitt. Mr. Nesbitt could you please say and spell your first and last name?

Robert Nesbitt (RN): My name is Robert Nesbit, R-O-B-E-R-T, Nesbitt, N-E-S-B-I-T-T.

OL: Could you please start by telling us when and where you were born?

RN: I was born January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1924 in New York City, Harlem.

OL: In Harlem?

RN: Yes.

OL: And where did you family live at the time?

RN: We were living in 79 Old Broadway, in the city.

OL: In Harlem?

RN: In Harlem. Of course in those days we didn't call it Harlem, it was whites, blacks. I mean whites, Jewish, Italian, Irish, everything lived in there. It wasn't like, it wasn't segregated the way it is now.

OL: What kind of building did you live in?

RN: Apartment house, 6-story apartment house.

OL: Like a walk-up apartment.

RN: Walk-up yes.

Dr. Claude Mangum (CM): What were the cross street of Broadway.

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RN: Oh, easy. It was 125<sup>th</sup> Street, and Broadway, Amsterdam Avenue and 125<sup>th</sup> Street. The projects is there, the city project, it was Manhattan Houses or something. They tore down the project, they tore down a house and they built the projects there now. You can still see little parts—snippets of Old Broadway on 125<sup>th</sup> Street and at 133<sup>rd</sup> Street which would've been the end of it. You can still see those.

CM: Did your parents ever describe to you why they moved to New York?

RN: Well, in so many words, my mother of course, come from North Carolina and here, to New York. And my father also came from South Carolina here to New York and they met in New York. Married here.

OL: Do you know how old they were when they came?

RN: Not exactly, not exactly.

OL: What were your parents doing for a living?

RN: My father did odds and ends, whatever he could find. My mother was working as a, a maid at one time. She worked on switchboards such as it was in those days. You had to bring tools, I remember she would save pliers and everything to make the connection some kind of way, whatever she could save you know? I remember that you know?

OL: Did you have any siblings?

RN: Yes, had 5 other brothers and sisters.

OL: Wow and where were you in--?

RN: I was next to the oldest. All together it would've been 9 but 3 actually died young. As infant babies, I never actually seen--.

OL: How many brothers and how many sisters?

RN: I have, had 3 sisters and 2 other brothers. Sister older than me, older sister, she's still living here in the Bronx.

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OL: How long did your family live in Harlem?

RN: They lived there until I must've been about 8 years old or so. From when my father got a job, eventually through his connections, supposed to be, he got a job with the Post Office, through the Post Office. And they got so mad at him pushing, he says for the job, that they transferred him to Queens. In those days Queens was out in the boondocks, I didn't even know where Queens was. So he had to work out in Flushing Post Office. And he'd just go out every day and was a lot of trips--. Eventually made us move to Queens, we moved to Queens, we moved there. But first before that, from Old Broadway, actually we moved to 145<sup>th</sup> Street. From 145<sup>th</sup> Street we moved to Queens. 145<sup>th</sup> between 7<sup>th</sup> and Lenox, we lived a large part of the time.

OL: What do you remember about that part of your life growing up in Harlem, until 8? What was it like being a young boy?

RN: Well, I remember the trolleys and the noise. I remember when we first moved to Queens, that first night, I woke up out in Queens, that night was quiet. I can't take this. You could hear the crickets, we was on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, you know living on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor. It was a 2 family apartment and I hear the crickets and everything else. I couldn't believe it, no trolley, no nothing, I don't like this. But after a day or two there I loved it, I loved Queens. It was just like Huckleberry Finn, living in Queens. You could go to the airport, that what they call LaGuardia now, that wasn't there. It was North Beach, that airport originally was North Beach Airport, we used to go to North Beach Airport all day long. Flushing Bay, we used to go to Flushing, shoot the rats with a bb gun and all day. Nobody ever got hurt. You'd go anywhere. Make a raft, go out in the raft. We used to wait after a storm when the yachts used to come out and the boats used to break away from, from the yacht, the little rowboat they'd have behind it to go to shore. After the storm sometime they'd get lose and we'd get the rowboat, we'd have our rowboat, it was like Huckleberry Finn, it was beautiful.

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CM: What part of Queens was it?

RN: 102<sup>nd</sup> Street and 32<sup>nd</sup> Avenue.

CM: The area was known as?

RN: Corona. They'd break everything—they like to call it East Elmhurst, Corona Heights, or Corona, Jackson Heights, you could throw a rock and hit all in a second. You know? Yes, it was very, very, very nice. I'd just sit there in school, 127<sup>th</sup>, I went to junior high, 92 before it became 127<sup>th</sup>, as you sit in school at night in the junior high school, I'd sit there and hear that Boeing 314 going to Lisbon, used to take off to LaGuardia going to Lisbon, Portugal and then to England. I'd sit there and see that out in the bay, I said look at that, you know? I remember that was beautiful, beautiful, Queens was beautiful. Hated leaving it.

CM: How long were you there in the Corona area?

RN: In the Corona area? I was there until I went into the service, 1942. I shouldn't do that. But anyway, I went in there 1942, we left, we left, I went to the Army and by the time I came back, my people had moved to Jamaica.

OL: Did you ever go back to the city after—to Manhattan when you were growing up living in Queens, did you mostly stay in Queens?

RN: I went back—I knew people---had cousins and everything there, back and forth you know what I mean, it was, I was back and forth. Not as much as I was in Queens. I actually grew up in Queens but I had relatives, friends and everything else, lived in Manhattan, always, you know?

CM: You remember what the transportation cost was?

RN: A nickel, a nickel, a nickel, and people was complaining like crazy too. I remember when the Daily news was 2 cents. And they raised it to 3 cents, people were—then it went to 5 cents on Sunday, people said they wasn't going to buy the paper anymore. I remember that, yes.

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OL: Tell us about your block in Corona, what was the ethnic makeup like?

RN: Oh, the block in Corona was a trip. It was all, the block was all black by then Corona. But we had, the family upstairs, the guy had 7 kids, the people next door to us, there was kids everywhere, there was kids everywhere. My father used to work nights, you know? So he's asleep in the day. In the summertime he used to try and sleep with all us kids, so he used to come out, we'd wake him up, he'd come out there because my mother was working, he'd come out and he'd say everybody who don't live here go home. Well he had, he had 6 kids, the people upstairs had 7, and nobody would move.

[Laughter]

RN: Then we'd get in all kinds of fights and scrapes and he would come out and try and settle it as best he could to get some sleep because that's what we used to call jury by fury. Because he would decide who was--. Queens was beautiful in those days, you know? You could lay down on all them—everybody knew everybody. You, you could go--. Well even Old Broadway, when my mother used to work, I remember when we used to live in Old Broadway particularly. She worked so she had a woman, Ms. Bunch, I'll never forget her as long as I live. She stood on the stoop and she could sleep. Big heavysset woman, my mother would tell her, you know to, don't let us leave the block. So we'd be downstairs playing, we figured she's asleep, the minute you tried to—where you going boy?

[Laughter]

RN: Ms. Bunch, yes.

OL: B-U-N-C-H?

RN: Yes, yes. I remember her well. She had 2 kids.

OL: So she kept an eye on you?

RN: Oh, yes. One eye, I don't know how she do it, but she'd be sleeping. But she'd keep an eye-

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- . But I was, I think I had a pretty life here—people talk about violence or this and that, and, and we didn't have it too-- . And I remember in Harlem now, at 145<sup>th</sup> Street that there was some trouble, you couldn't go in this block in 148<sup>th</sup> Street-but I was pretty young. I was too young to really be that much involved. By that time we'd moved out in Queens, you know? In Queens, the only thing you had trouble sometimes in Queens if you went over in the Italian section or the other side of that 104<sup>th</sup> Street at Roosevelt Avenue stop. We were over there sometimes or if you rode your bike over there, then the Irish kids-- . But it was minor, minor compared to what is today.

CM: What was your school like, was it P.S. 127 you said?

RN: 127 and Haaren High School of Aviation. That's how I got my aviation-- . By the time we went to, by the time I went in the Army, I pretty well versed-- . I knew, you know, I was always interested in things, how things worked. But I was always interested in really how, well yes how they worked and how it was made, where it come from and aviation I was particularly fascinated. How the planes were made, who invented what, why they did it, why this worked. And I nearly went to Indianapolis on the advanced engine school, it was the most amazing—I met a guy he was actually a race track driver in civilian life and an engineer, he was an engineer and he would explain things boy, about biometric efficiency, overlapping valves and all that stuff that I hear them talking now that he was deep—it was very enjoyable. I always liked understanding why they, why they do it just the way. Why does it work this way? Where does the metal come from, how do they make it, why is it made? Why do you make it this way, why you freeze one and heat the other and put it together? I always fascinated with science.

CM: I was at the—I mentioned to you earlier at a Memorial Day service yesterday and the guest speaker was a Tuskegee Airman like yourself and he talked about people living out their dreams

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and you had mentioned earlier that there was North Beach Airport—did you ever think about going into air as a career when you were a little boy and saw the planes?

RN: Oh yes, but I was very naïve. I didn't realize at the time you wasn't going into air, it would be pretty ridiculous to go into that as a career even in high school. Career in high school, they'd all but tell you, you wasting your time because you're not going to get a job.

CM: And by you did they mean African American?

RN: African Americans absolutely, absolutely, you couldn't, you couldn't--. As a matter of fact, when we came out of the Army, right, we came out of the Army in 1945, I went to all these airports trying to get—trying to get a job. You know but they wouldn't hire you. And so then I went to, I went to—no before, before I went around and tried to get a job in '45, I went to civilian school to get my A&E licenses because you had to get civilian licenses, you know, the master mechanics licenses. And I got them from Roosevelt Field then it was open, and so I went there and I got my master—A&E, aircraft and engine licenses there you know? Master licenses in those days. And then when you went around, you couldn't—the first thing they would ask you, well I'm sorry we can't hire you because you don't have multi-engine experience, but that's because I come from a fighter—but that was an excuse. You come from fighter squadron and we got plenty of [inaudible] got mechanics but they weren't going to hire you. Because even the pilots couldn't find a job.

CM: So going back a little bit earlier, you mentioned Haaren High School, I guess that's in Manhattan.

RN: Yes, Manhattan.

CM: And aviation high school I know is in Queens now.

RN: Now, you used to be, that, that school that's in Lawson Avenue in Queens, that used to be Manhattan Aviation in the city. Then when they, when they, they, they closed, they did away

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Haaren, that was always secondary to Manhattan Aviation was a better school, you know? So but when they did away with Haaren and then they moved Manhattan aviation that was years later out—out there in Queens. That, that was the original school—that was, that was, still is, was a good school.

CM: You had mentioned that some of your instructors sort of discouraged African-American students. What was it like with your classmates, white and black and other racial and ethnic groups?

RN: Mostly white, mostly white, 1 or 2 Spanish, I'll say Puerto Rican and Spanish. Wasn't many of them but mostly white.

CM: And what was the interaction between the white and the black students?

RN: Well as a matter of fact we had to ride back and forth school where there was all white kids that come from Queens. We went to 127 and we were going to school together. We rode back and forth on the train together. We got along. We didn't have, we didn't have no particular trouble that I can remember.

OL: Did the teachers foster that intellectual curiosity that you had?

RN: No, they—they never particularly. I had one that impressed me. That was only in—that was in junior high school, 127. We had a woman, Ms. Sclaw, I'll never forget Ms. Sclaw, she's a Polish woman, she was a science I think it was. But anyway, she was very good, she would explain things to anyone—she, she went in and brought a block of a car. It was so heavy she couldn't get it out of her trunk. She had to get 3 or 4 of us guys to bring this block—this whole block of a car up in her classroom in 127. And she would show us, you know point out, how, how, how the thing worked. You know why the holes, why the hills are drilled--. She was amazing; I'll never forget her. Some of them, some of them—but I tell Shonda, when I talk to Shonda, a lot--.

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CM: Shonda Nesbitt is your daughter?

RN: My daughter, yes. But I tell her a lot of things around here--talk to my grandson, I tell him oh so and so—then I think of myself, I say you dummy you should've done a lot better than what you did. You know, really knowing now it is—even opportunity—even in the Army, you know? When I was in the Army they insisted that I be, I was a, I was a mechanic. Then we like—now they like to say I was an aircraft maintenance technician, in those days you were an aircraft mechanic, but you know, they have to have a nice sound to it. But anyway I was assistant engineering chief.

CM: Okay I was just was going to go back--. What year was it that you joined the Army? And what was your motivation?

RN: It was October 1942.

OL: How old were you then?

RN: I was 18 years old.

OL: Okay so you finished high school.

RN: Yes, and I joined in 19—I joined at 18 years old. Reason why, number 1 you couldn't get a job, because they were very precious. When the war first started, you couldn't—blacks couldn't get no jobs, you couldn't hardly get a porter, you couldn't get clearance to get in a defense plant hardly.

CM: And I would imagine at this time, a majority of African Americans did not have high school?

RN: Oh no, no. Far, few between. But even that wasn't so much as much as, in the draft I was 1A in the draft. Because we had a draft, you know everybody 18 to 38 had to register the draft. And at 18 years old I was 1A in the draft. Nobody, even if I could've got a job who was going to hire me at a plant where they know that any minute you're going to be drafted. And then I knew

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it in October and that year, in that year I knew that I was 18 years old and my friends were being picked off into the Army. Into the draft. So I knew they were going to draft me. And I knew they were going to put you anywhere they wanted when they draft you. They can put you anywhere they want but if you volunteered you could pick your service. Well I was so stupid and naïve to not realize, they're really seriously that once you sign that thing they can put you anywhere they want. So I went up there, Lord help me, and I joined the Army. They give you a little aptitude test to see, I went to go—to become an aircraft mechanic and they give you an aptitude test, you know, here. And then they accepted me and sent me out to kill [inaudible].

CM: I'm just going to back up for a second. I was born on December 7<sup>th</sup>, not 1941, but December 7<sup>th</sup> anyway and so that date, you know—famous if not infamous. The bombing of Pearl Harbor, what was the reaction in your family and among your friends to America's entry into World War II? With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, did black people see this as an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty and citizenship, were they eager to join the service? Did they think there would be changes?

RN: I think, I, I think that generally we thought, at least I thought that we'd be able to get jobs, you know, good jobs, I thought there would be plenty of jobs, that's for sure because things were opening up you know? And I thought we'd be able to get plenty of jobs. But and I thought the war'd be over in 2 days.

[Laughter]

RN: You know? I mean being very naïve about the whole thing. I guess 18 years old, you know? But I, I, I that what I honestly thought, I didn't think that, I didn't think the war would last so long. I thought there would be plenty of jobs and I thought in the Army, I thought you'd get plenty of opportunity you know? Really I thought it'd be a good chance to get a—which, which it was that. I loved the work that—I really like, you know. But I just wouldn't stay in after the

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war was over, so I said I'm getting out of here you know? But, but I liked working on the engines you know?

OL: What was your parents' reaction when, when you decided to join the military? My father loved—my father was a veteran by the way of the Second World War—First World War. He was a disabled veteran. The second one, he drew a pension up until the time he died. So he, he, you know he was all that whole, whole you know? But my mother didn't like it one little bit too much I guess.

CM: So your father was wounded abroad?

RN: He was hurt here in the States. Something happened to his hand some kind of way, whatever way he told it. But he drew a pension, he drew VA until the day he died, pension. He hurt his hand, his hand was mangled, he couldn't use his hand, you know? Yes, but he had a friend, another friend of his was seriously, he went overseas, organ, a gas eye, he lost an eye and everything else. That guy was really messed up.

OL: What were your siblings doing? You were the second you said in terms of age.

RN: Yes, my older sister she was working. She was working downtown and the rest were too young. Me and her were the 2 oldest they were too young, at that time. Course they were all going to school during the war. But like I said, it was an experience.

CM: So here you are, a young man, a high school graduate 18 years old coming from perhaps a more integrated experience than most African Americans, what was it like when you went to basic training?

RN: I went out there to Camp Upton.

CM: Where is that located?

RN: Out on Long Island. Now it used to be a Boy Scout camp, now I don't think there's nothing there. I think there's a housing development now. It was a big camp and there were World War I

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and II, Camp Upton was a big deal. Anyway, we went to Camp Upton, I looked at all them guys that still had on civilian clothes they were running around there, some of them were playing soldier, I said this is [inaudible], I [inaudible] to be my mother.

[Laughter]

RN: What a mistake this was. So were there, of course I hadn't been away from home really. So we was there about 2 or 3 days I'll say. They packed us right on up. Tuskegee, they shipped Tuskegee.

CM: So again, here you are young, a New Yorker being shipped South to Alabama. What was that like?

RN: The only thing saved me, like I said, I knew the South because I knew from my mother and father and I listened. Yes, I mean, you know here them talking, what they talked about at the table, my cousins, all my relatives were all Southern you know come from the South you know? And so I knew, I knew what to expect but the only thing I can say is when we, when we got down there, when I got actually in there with the guys, these guys, a lot of them guys were older men. You took some of them guys, I was 18 just left my mommy you know--.

[Laughter]

RN: But I always, God helped me, because I always knew what I didn't know in my head, you know? I was-I knew I, I knew I didn't know nothing. I knew I was only 18 years old. I knew these guys had been around—they might've been 24 or—but they were more world—yes, he's from New York, yes. I didn't know what was going on. Sometimes, and I had been lucky I didn't believe what everybody told me and I didn't follow it. But sometimes it was a mistake, sometimes what they were telling me were right. You know what I mean? And other times, you know? But it was not something, I had to catch, I had to catch on quick boy.

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CM: Well, I guess that's another point in addition to--I guess the racial segregation and racism that existed sometimes it appears to be a bias against people from big cities and so--.

RN: Oh, yes, oh definitely. Even in the Army, even in among the men—the other guys in the service, I mean when you get in the service, and they find out you from New York, oh man they know, they don't want to talk any—you slick, you're slender, you try to trick them, you think you're smarter than everybody else, oh yes, definitely. Even in, even in the service, like I'm saying, they had little cliques. They had the Texas clique. They had the New York clique and the California-- New York and the California clique were about the 2 most biggest ones with Texas in between. And they're all kind of cliques, you know, among the men, but then I joined, I joined anybody was my friend was from—I didn't care, that, that was, that was another thing had to do—but it's sort of stupid in a way, when, when you're in a thing like that, especially as young and dumb as I was, try and go with the flow and don't make so many [inaudible]. I just wouldn't, I just wouldn't do it, I went wherever I wanted to go, whoever I wanted to be my friend, I didn't care where you came from. It made for a lot of confusion, I made a lot—I didn't, I didn't suffer, you know what I mean? I guess me and my brothers and sisters we used to practice at home, we could wisecrack each other, you know--? Just like you see on TV you know? And you could, I could hold my own with them you know? Even though half the time I didn't know what I was talking about.

OL: So when you went for basic training was it just your unit there and African American unit or there were other--?

RN: Are you kidding? Absolutely black. Everything. Absolutely.

CM: Were the instructors black?

RN: Oh yes. Yes, in Tuskegee. Now, yes the basic training ones. But when they came to the aviation training part they had white instructors there because there was no such thing as black.

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The only one that had any kind of black instructors who could've helped us was the 99<sup>th</sup> part because they were already formed a year ahead of us. But they were so prejudiced they wouldn't do that. You know? I think they were so determined, I say now, to undermine the thing, they sent us these white guys, instructors, them guys, some of them guys were the dumbest, couldn't even read and write and they were on--. And then what got us angry, they were—those guys that they sent there as our instructors they were taking our rank because they'd come in as privates and they were giving them our rank off our table of organization for our outfits. And that got us mad too. By the time, as the thing developed by the time we got up—we didn't want no part of those guys. We avoided—plus being young and dumb, you know? But the training was definitely—the basic training was all black. You know, the Army we're marching and drilling, I thought that was the horriblest thing--.

[Laughter]

RN: These people got to be crazy. I didn't join this thing to do this. You know? I was a technician. I didn't join to do that. Yes, but, but them mechanical part I loved that, you know, I loved working the planes, working with—there was problems on the line and the headaches and this and that and the other--. I, I really got into that, you know?

CM: Did you have an advantage coming out of aviation high school?

RN: Oh, definitely, definitely. That's why I was, I was [inaudible]. I definitely had an advantage. I knew every plane, every thing, I knew every type, every German plane and the engines and how--. It was just out of curiosity that I was interested in all these things you know? And then, so I was, I was assistant engineer and chief, you know? At 18 years old, 19 years old assistant engineering chief for the squadron. In the squadron I was in the 100<sup>th</sup> and it was, pretty interesting but then it got to be pretty tricky with responsibility. See I was a private, I tell my daughter Sandra, they were talking about leadership. Some people are born to be leaders that

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want to first that want to be top, see me, I'm quite content not to be the leader. They say that's not supposed to be good. Now when you get killed or you get shot I'm turning around, they may not call that cool but I said hey, you know what I said, I don't have to be out front let somebody else be out in front. I'll be back here, I'll be over here. But anyway, I, I was assistant engineering chief, Eldridge he was the engineering chief and they were running all kinds of tests on these planes, not a test—flights on these planes and states because they were trying to get in gunnery proctors to go overseas. Pilot in daylight and so we had to service them and they decided to service them at night because they didn't want to take them out of flying in the day, so they flying—I serviced them at night in the hangars. So naturally, the engineering, the engineering chief he ain't going to work nights. So I worked nights. I said to the engineering chief I don't blame him, I had to work the nights. Night shift you know. Everything's put in charge of mechanics to do work on these planes you know. But [inaudible], boy, they wasn't so much giving me a case, I was just too young and immature. That's when I look at it today. I wasn't mature enough to handle the men, these older men. I had [inaudible] since I left my momma you know what I mean. I, I, I couldn't handle the responsibility—you had to run behind these guys. I, I, I didn't think you had to do that. I think like, you are on the line, you knew your job, I shouldn't have to run behind you. You know what you're supposed to do. I said so and so, you supposed to do it. I'm not supposed to you know, but some guys you had to baby, some guys knew that you—the way you—would never try and take advantage of you. But I couldn't take it so I went got the engineering office, I said I don't want to be assistant engineering—I went back to being just an engineering mechanic. I liked that. But they still, like I said, they were still were always coming up, fresher things. And we got overseas, they sent advance detail, they opened up another field north of us, they had to send mechanics up to that. Who'd they pick to go there? Me

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in charge of these mechanics. They got an assistant engineering chief and engineering chief, said  
who are they? I'm not supposed to go up there?

CM: So how long were you at Tuskegee before you were shipped abroad?

RN: Let's see now, we went there and got Tuskegee in October, October and then we went to  
Selfridge Field and that was in '43. That was in '43 we went to Detroit, that was nice Detroit.

OL: What was the name of the field again?

RN: Selfridge Field, it's still there. It's an old Army field, Selfridge field. Beautiful old time  
hangars, they don't make them like that anymore, you know? That was outside of Detroit, Mount  
Clemens, Selfridge Field. From there, that's when we went overseas. From Selfridge Field.

CM: I know sometimes when people think of the Tuskegee airmen they think of the pilots but  
perhaps you can describe to us the different positions and the roles?

RN: Oh sure, sure yes. It's quite—it's funny you would bring that—because most people don't.  
The formation of a squadron. A single engine fighter squadron in World War II, consisted of say  
300 men, 300 men in any 1 squadron, right. So we had the 300 men, out of 300 men, 250 of  
those men in that squadron are enlisted men. That is men from the rank from private to sergeants  
of some kind, 250 of them. So we're talking about 50 men, or I'll say maybe, I'll cut it short, I'll  
say maybe 40 men that's officers in that one squadron. And that one squadron, the majority of  
those officers are pilots in there. And the rest you have some ground officers that don't fly. But  
the majority of them are pilots, you know? They are less trouble. The pilot officers are less  
trouble, they didn't break your backbone crazy—some of them could be a nuisance because they  
want to play soldier—but the pilots, they, they—it wasn't that way. Then, then in the squadron,  
out of the 250, everybody in the squadron have a job. Because nobody out of 250 men, enlisted  
men, nobody sits there for decoration or lollygagging everybody have a spec number of what  
you're supposed of to be you know? My spec number was 750 in those days, that was a crew

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chief of an engineering mechanic and that's what the job called for. If you're spec 750 that's what you can do. You know, then you had—yes okay I was an engineering mechanic, you had prop mechanics, and [inaudible] guys, prop chief, prop specialist, you had electricians all in-- Well, in the, in the, in the squadron itself, we had linemen, in the squadron you had a lot of what we call linemen. These are men that work on the line. Flying line with their—that was us. They were divided in 2 groups. The engineering group and the line group themselves. The line group had crew chiefs, each plane, every plane has a crew chief. And every airplane, when it comes to the squadron is assigned a crew chief, a crew chief assigned to their plane. He has to sign acceptance, the crew chief have to sign accepting the plane into the squad—he had to do an inspection and if the plane passed inspection it had to be in the squadron. He takes charge of the plane right? And then he might, if he's lucky have assistant crew chief, which is a miracle if you do. You know, but then that's his plane. Okay that's the crew chief. Then but you also have a radio chief, you have an armament chief, you have instrument men. You had a parachute man.

CM: So the parachute men would fold and prepare the parachutes is that what--?

RN: Prepare all the parachutes yes. But it wasn't group 1's general place. Not with my squadron, they have one simple place for all the squadron. Normally a squadron would only have, normally a squadron would belong to a fighter group, the fighter group would consist of 3 squadrons, 3 squadrons in a fighter group. I was forced to get 4. The 99<sup>th</sup> joined as at Naples, that made us have 4 squadrons. Which me and my friends, just the higher educated genius friends felt that they would be putting pilots [inaudible], because we were putting a lot of traffic over our field. And landing and take off we had a lot aircrafts because you got extra squadron out there you know? And we always thought that wasn't too good but we had 4 squadrons until they broke, they finally broke up the 302<sup>nd</sup> near the end of the war they didn't need it. So we only

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wind up with 3. But it's supposed to be 3 squadrons in a fighting group. Well 1 fighter and a fighter group.

[END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B]

RN: And that's the way it's defined.

CM: The radiomen I guess they're people in meteorology, dealing with the weather and--?

RN: No. No the radiomen strictly did radio. That's, that's what they did. You had, you had a radio crew chief. If you had radio trouble they would come out and service it for you. But the weather and things like that, that was done, it's part of group intelligence. Like when they brief them, that was done, that's when they would—the pilots themselves were never concerned with the-- . Well I mean they were concerned with it, but they didn't have no, they didn't have no part in deciding—because the pilots used to complain. I can't take off the weather's too bad. They have us fly in that kind of weather. And they would tell them the bombers are out. You know the bombers are off, you know? And what they would do is like, when a mission start in the morning, say versus at night, the night before the mission, in the middle of the night 'bout 3 o'clock they charge the quarters. We'd get a phone call, each squadron, get a call, you'd get a telephone call, matter of fact the only ones that did the charge of quarters was the staff sergeants which was my rank. The only ones who did charge of quarters, took turns doing the charge of quarters, not just sit, all you do is sit at the telephone and you had to wake up the cooks and wake up this officer of the day. And that was the most important thing, calling the officer of the day. When the telephone ring, it was the air force command, the officer of the day please then you would go out and get him, he'd come out of his tent and come and pick up the phone. They do all these codes, 42, 76, so, so they was giving him the mission, you know? That was the mission for that day, okay and he, he did, he'd take and he'd go on, that tell him where the planes are going to go. Then they met that morning, they'd call all the pilots, and they'd brief them, where they

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going to go. Where—how many planes it's going to be. The load, the gas load, ammunition load, where you going to rendezvous, the time they meet the bombers and where.

CM: So as I understand it then, the fighter squadron supported and protected the bombers.

RN: Yes, yes.

CM: And what was the range or the area of the work of the Tuskegee airmen?

RN: Oh, we flew all the way from—we flew all the way from Naples into Berlin. That was our longest range to Berlin. That's an 8-hour trip, and that's hard on those pilots. You didn't think so at the time, but you can imagine today, sitting in one of them planes in that single engine plane cold, if you had to go to toilet, there's no such thing. Except for on yourself. Really that's the way it was you know? And you flew that thing 7 hours or 8 hours on that meant cold and boring. And all the while especially, all the while you're looking, all the while—you better look, you better look because they were going to get you. You known? And then, the noise of the engine, the oxygen on you everything else. It was pretty rough, it was pretty rough on you, you know?

RN: You were located in Italy and you went to Berlin and then Northern Africa as well?

RN: Well now, now you're getting to another thing. The one's who went to Northern Africa was the 99<sup>th</sup>, the 99<sup>th</sup> was that 1 squadron. They left before we did, they went in 1943, they went to North Africa. We were still in the States.

OL: What was your squadron?

RN: 100<sup>th</sup>, I was in the 100<sup>th</sup> fighter squadron. And they went--the 99<sup>th</sup> went first. They went into North Africa, Sicily and Italy. And we met them in, and they met us or we met them, they say, they say that the papers said we met them and I said they met us because we had the bigger group.

[Laughter]

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RN: We met them in Naples, which I hadn't seen—because they were the first planes I worked on was the 99<sup>th</sup> planes. In Tuskegee, they formed the 100<sup>th</sup>, they assigned, work assigned to the 99<sup>th</sup> because they had airplanes, we didn't have no airplanes or no mechanics either, you know? So we worked, so we worked in 99<sup>th</sup>. Trained with them, them guys, crew chiefs with them, you know? Until they went overseas. But you know--.

CM: I've read accounts in England when there were African American soldiers that the Europeans were very friendly. That racism was brought by white Americans.

RN: Yes, God was it.

CM: What was your experience like in Italy, you know dealing with raw Italians as well as white soldiers?

RN: Well the Italians, the Italians themselves had no discrimination. They did not discriminate. They didn't care, they could care less. They took you as you was, they look at you, oh look at the chocolata chocolata, they look at the chest oh they're tutanilo, tutanilo, it didn't mean nothing to them. And then, and but the whites, the whites used to--.

CM: Be the white Americans.

RN: Oh yes, their worst enemy was the white Americans. The white Americans, they try and get around every time, didn't have nothing to do—I didn't pay no attention to them. They just laugh and talk, say that the black American soldiers are like Italians inside out. Joke and play the dozens. No, they really had no discrimination, really, really didn't. The only place you run into discrimination I think is probably when you start contending for things. If it was jobs, of course I'm going beyond that, if you were contending for jobs, you get this hassle. Or women, you know that would—but as a rule, you go to Naples and Genoa and them places, off limits. You could go anywhere in Naples you wanted to go. Because you're a black soldier, now Genoa was another example. In Genoa, I went there, that was beautiful place. Everything was off limits,

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supposed to be, and we went everywhere you can go in there because the 92<sup>nd</sup> division was coming up to Genoa and when their [inaudible], freedom fighters in Genoa found out that the Americans was coming, the Americans was coming they ran started uprising against the Germans. This is guys in 92<sup>nd</sup> told me. They said by the time we got to Genoa they had already killed or ran all the Germans out of town anyways. When we came through there, they were all mad, so then the Italians got so when you go to Genoa, they look on your pass, if you had the buffalo on there, the 92<sup>nd</sup>, you had the buffalo, you at the airport [inaudible], yes. They love the buffalo sign. Buffalo Soldier, Buffalo Soldier.

CM: So this is the buffalo soldiers dating back almost to the Civil War then--?

RN: Yes, it's that same 92<sup>nd</sup>, yes. But now today known them as the Buffalo Soldier, because they had the buffalo patch on your shoulder. But they, they really messed those guys up bad. They really did. They take, take, those guys and take the most ignorant men in the outfit, couldn't read or write or read a map and put them in charge. And [inaudible] would say, alright, you want to be in charge, put them charge. And naturally that's on their mind because you know they don't know what they doing, you know? They did all kinds of things them guys. Then at one time I remember particularly, I seen that with my own eyes in Rome, the U.S.O. in Rome, they had that big U.S. [inaudible], Frank Sinatra, I'm making up now I can't remember, Bobby Str—whoever they were in those does. Had this big show in the Rome, in Rome I forget the name of the place. Coliseum, it wasn't in the Coliseum but it was there in Rome. They had this big show and the 92<sup>nd</sup> guys, infantry guys were coming, they wanted to come to the show. So they came with they women to the show. The white MP's at the gate wouldn't let them in with them women they had, naturally Italian women. They said we don't want you there with them kind of women because there's American women in there and we don't want the American—the American women don't want to associate with they had to be prostitutes. Because they're with

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them right? So them guys, them guys in the 92<sup>nd</sup>, I saw the second part of the thing. Those guys went back out town there and told them other guys in the 92<sup>nd</sup> that they wouldn't let them in now. Those guys came and—they came back into Rome with them [inaudible] trucks, machine guns on top and they drove up to the entrance, you know and that's when I was there--. They let them, they let them in. They let them go in.

OL: Once they let them in were they able to sit where everybody--?

RN: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Anything over there, they didn't like it. But anything over there you went anywhere you wanted. But our biggest trouble with sitting anywhere we want was before we went overseas at Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia. They wouldn't let us go to the movies, you had to go to a segregated movie, on the base. And we, we said no we going overseas, you mean to say we can't go in any movie on the base we wanted to, you know? They had a big stink over there and that's when I give out B.O. Davis, I give B.O. credit. You know a lot of them guys--.

CM: Maybe you can tell us exactly who General Benjamin O. Davis Junior was.

RN: Well he was a son, his father was, B.O. Davis Senior had been in the Army for a million years, you know, a cavalry officer. But B.O. was at West Point, we had 2 West Pointers and he was one of them. B.O. was a guy, my impression of him he was can associate with anybody, he could hang out with those officers, his own officers, most of them, he was tough, let me put it that way. He didn't take any—if you see any pictures of him, you'll see him, he's sitting at attention. And I think he slept at attention. Oh, that was B.O. But I give him credit. He wasn't—he was a man of ideals, at Patrick Henry he called them in and told them, my men should be able to go—go to any, any movie they want on this post, you know. So and so and so, he was rough, I give him credit. It could be for the time, the day that we were living in, you know? But anyway, I lost my train of thought, but in Italy itself there was no discrimination, they, they didn't, they

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didn't, you could go to Rome you could anywhere you wanted and especially places like Rome, Naples, Genoa, Florence. Them people had seen blacks since—there was nothing new about blacks. As a matter of fact I saw the strangest sight in Rome. To see walking down the street one day in Rome, this guy walking down the street pushing a cart, this black guy and he's pushing with another guy, a Chinese guy. They both are pushing this thing. Pushing this cart, a black guy and this Chinese looking guy. And they're arguing with each other, the odd thing they're arguing in Italian.

[Laughter]

RN: I said my goodness, a black man he better get himself straight. Because we, we used to laugh and say all we got to do is take off our uniform and put on this stuff and they'll think we think we're from Africa. And then you had this guy he didn't speak nothing but that Italian. I thought that was the funniest thing. They arguing pushing this push cart. Loaded with stuff together you know? Yes, that was funny.

OL: You mentioned the men who came to the U.S.O. show with Italian women, did you witness a lot of African American men dating Italian women?

RN: Dating, oh yes. Are you kidding there was nothing over there. The only thing is, one thing was so funny. When we came back, when we came back to the States, first time we came back, and Patrick Henry all the way in Staten Island and we saw a black woman--.

[Laughter]

RN: We couldn't believe it. Then we had a sort of, because we had a black U.S.O. woman overseas there, you know. But we, we was so glad. Yes, sir. We came into—I'll never forget that's another one, when we came home, coming, coming out the ocean, come across the ocean coming back here, I didn't know about the sea really, and we could see the water, it was green out in the ocean and it started getting grey, grey, grey looking, dirty grey. Then you started

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seeing things floating in the water, you know. I said we must be getting near land. All of a sudden look up there and what do we see, that thing, Ambrose, you know—I never saw it before but I knew where Ambrose Lighthouse, was the guard out there in New York Harbor. We got to be home now. You know, so we steaming, steaming, finally, finally I pick out, out there on the right hand side, looked like land you know? Land, looked like sand dunes, and it's getting more and you see more and more sand. That was Long Island, you know, so then you see built up, built up and that's all. And then finally you can see the parachute thing at Coney Island, then, then the yacht came up and met us, were all the black women. Two yachts came out and met us with the spire thing going up there—it was our first meal it was steak dinner. Every soldier, every troop, every soldier coming back from overseas got a steak. His first meal in the United States was steak dinner.

CM: What year was this?

RN: 1945. That was October '45.

OL: So if we could just go back before your turn? You talked a little bit about being on the planes and kind of the hardship of that, did you, did you see men, do you lose men from your unit—what kind of combat did you see?

RN: Naturally, being the ground crew, it wasn't like being up there. Really, where the real action was those pilots. Those guys are really hanging out up there. But we saw planes run into each other, we had an incident with an Italian when it crossed the runway with the sheep and the planes plowed into the sheep. Airplanes crashed into each other, because this guy with the sheep, you know, and guys, 2 guys, you take them out of the planes nothing but their buckles left. Fire you know. And then in Naples airport when they had the crash, of course when Vesuvius, then Vesuvius erupted in 1945 in Naples and that thing went up. You could stand outside at night and read the paper, you know, it was red, everything was red. Just like in that picture King-Kong

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where you see [makes a noise] that's the way it was at night. Not at night all day. But you could hear [makes noise again] and at night--.

OL: You could hear the volcano?

RN: Oh, sure everything was red. You could read. Red like amber. It was red, you could read. And so the Germans, said everything is all lit up, we can find, we can find Naples airport now. They bombed—one night we were under attack I was on the CQ that night. When, when they came over, what they were trying to do, they say that's our room too. They said they were trying to bomb the gas--. We had big gas network, poison gas, oh we had miles of poison gas. And it, just waiting for the Germans to use it. Just use that poison gas and we're going to fix you, you know? That's another thing, we had all our fighter planes equipped to drop poison gas. They had one turn on, all we had to put the canister up there, wrap that wire around it and tighten the nut on it. And then the switch in the cockpit would release the gas. But the Germans would never use it because they knew that we had superiority, and we proved this because they would wait around. So the Germans said we're going to bomb their gas works where they got the gas. It was miles of that stuff stacked. But I don't know why they couldn't hit it. But they dropped bombs on our field you know. Banged up a couple of airplanes that's about it. But I didn't know why they couldn't--you couldn't miss them. So I don't know why.

CM: I know the Tuskegee airmen have this proud history of never losing a bomber?

RN: Not true. We, we, we don't want to push that. Somebody said that by mistake. Years ago and the white, white crews, or white air force take offense, which understandably so, because it's almost impossible. Can you imagine sending all those missions we flew on, I had a book with all our missions if you see them—the German Air Force never attacked, they never came down into the air? Of course they did. They were flying for their country, the motherland, you know, they did. But we had a very low accident rate, loss rate. I think it was only 6, a miracle,

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that record alone, I don't know how, sometime I think it's got to be wrong. But that's not true.

And they try and we try not to say that. I mean people are in the know trying to—because, it's, it's not true and—it irritates the other outfit because it's not true. But we had a very—matter of fact they were requested, they liked for them to escort, because they stayed so close and so tight in with the bombers, you know. They didn't go off and leave them, you know, so they liked us.

But we lost, we lost, we lost a lot of planes. We lost a lot of planes. He was asking about, a lot of guys, you'd be flying—because people don't realize that those aircraft are like a race horse, they're high performance aircraft and they're like a race horse, is a high performance horse.

Something will get sick, sick, die, hurt his leg or the whole horse pulling the wagon. But that's the comparison with these, these planes were high, highly, high performance aircraft, they're tuned up to the last ounce of performance you could get out—it's running it's heart out. And the least little goes wrong, you had it. And it's a lot of engine, and a lot of plane. Because people don't realize but those fighter planes, those engines, an automobile engine has more moving parts than a jet engine. Far more, you know, far more, a jet engine has far fewer parts you know. It's easy to maintain, a jet engine's easy to maintain, than a, than an ordinary gasoline engine is. The only thing is the jet engine just got--operate with a lot of special metals, you know, high, high heat, high tension, high heat metals.

CM: But if something goes wrong--.

RN: And the other thing is too, with the, with your jet engine everything is, everything is electronic. Everything's, everything's on electronic, electronic is heavy in, in a modern aircraft. Matter of fact even in our aircraft, our biggest troubles with our aircraft coming back was generally electrical. Some kind of electrical trouble. That would disable—but more so the mechanical thing. That was [inaudible] being shot with a 20-millimeter canon, blow the engine away or something you know. But that's just the way it was. But our electrical would give us the

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hardest time as far early return planes coming back, things would go wrong electrically and the jets, these jets today they're all electric. Everything on there is electric, you know computer, electric, you know. You couldn't fly them, you couldn't fly them, they couldn't be flown without the computer.

OL: Given what you, what you're saying about the, the planes and, and the level of performance, you're job was really important, did the airmen appreciate how important and how critical what you were doing was to keeping them safe?

RN: The pilots were very tight; you never had trouble with the pilot you know? The pilots are very tight. They, but you know, when you grow up, and then especially with year to years after years, you sort of get old, you get a little wisdom with age you realize that actually it's to be expected. And because nobody know of the name of the knight—you know who a knight is, you don't know the name of his trainer or the paige or who cares. Doolittle flew, you know the name of the crew chief? Who cares? So I mean that's understood, you know, but you know you were there, you know. And like I said you can talk all you want if you on the ground, that guy's at 30,000 feet, flying in the cold and then I used to think about our guys black on top of it. That's another hard thing. Speaking of that, you could think—I always used to think then that God help you if you bail out in Germany. You know, they would do a number on you. You know? Our pilots that did jump and wound up in Germany, the Germans treated them just as good, just equally as a matter of fact, when they caught them, they put them right in with the rest of them. And they got along, you know what I mean, but the Germans didn't single out them. As a matter of fact, well that was normal for any army you know? If you bail out you're better off if you're captured, to be captured by a soldier. Don't be captured by that civilian because he'll do a number on you, you know so--? But the Germans, dare I say treated them well, but they didn't treat them no worse than they did the white soldiers. And I always thought they would. I thought

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they'd do all kinds of--. I used to think—but I found out later after the War, I found some guys that really was captured. They didn't bother me any more so than anybody else. You know?

OL: Did you have a sense of the kinds of mission that the airmen sent on? Were they sent on--?

One of the things that's depicted in films is that they were, you know, sent on very dangerous missions because they were seen as kind of expendable.

RN: No, they didn't—you mean the blacks you mean?

OL: Yes.

RN: No. That wasn't true. That's not the way they did it. But first place, the missions that they were sent on come from Washington D.C. The mission they recall, call the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, we're going to fly a raid to, the [inaudible], the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force would draw up the mission. How many planes, how many so and so, how many so and so, how many so and so, that's with the planes. They all went. And then they made the whites run on the same mission. There was no mission—where now they're going to Berlin to pick that one--. Our, our squadron picked the lead to lead to Berlin, they'll meet the bombers at the rendezvous point and escort them to the target. Once they come out of the target, come off the target out of Berlin and fly back to Italy another squadron would meet them to take them and take them back. Our squadrons released to shoot at targets of opportunity on the ground. Anything that moved in Germany or wherever they are, that's for our planes. And then the other planes just fly—but they took turns they didn't, they didn't, they didn't. The one thing was dangerous it all was dangerous, but the only thing was really, they were shooting--. You start shooting at trains and things on the ground, things blow up in front of you, you come right—if you was shooting at that and you come at it, you hit it, it blowing, you going to fly through all that stuff, a lot of guys--. But they, they didn't, they didn't, they didn't particularly give us any harder mission--. As a matter of fact our planes flew—that Berlin mission our planes took the longest—we had the most planes out that made the trip there and

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back and again, than the other outfits did, you know? But that was just what they did. The only thing what they did wasn't fair, well wasn't fair, was the length of time, I mean missions, that a pilot had to fly before he was rotated home. Our pilots had to fly far more missions before they come back home because they didn't have pilots to replace them, you know? That part of it wasn't fair, but the whole thing, that whole thing I, I—in my later years I often thought was engineered for failure. Because even the way they trained us, from the very beginning, the 99<sup>th</sup> was well trained, because they stayed so long without going anywhere, but when they formed our—the other 3 squadrons, they never thought of taking some of the men out of the 99<sup>th</sup> and spreading those men into our squadron. Those guys had the experience but instead of taking some of our men and putting a few of them in the 99<sup>th</sup> and that way keeping the--. Because that's not the way white outfits, squadrons are not formed that way. White squadron, when they were going to form the new squadrons, they said okay we're going to open a squadron. 6<sup>th</sup> squadron this is here. They'd put all of those men in that 6<sup>th</sup> squadron, they were almost all seasoned men that they took out of that squadron, they put a few new people in there with them and the other new people, they go to seasoned squadrons because they're already out there. But see they--.

OL: They didn't do that.

RN: Yes, we couldn't just—they didn't do that. And you'd think one thing some of them—some of the mechanics, you know poor maintenance. You really undermined now because you wouldn't want to fly. Who would want to fly after—the pilots wasn't competent you know? That's why we always had to watch. Like I said there's pictures there with the engine all tore down and everything else, you might've been torn out and all but we put every ounce--that plane was just as safe as it possibly could as if it was done in the States you know? We didn't, we didn't, we didn't play with a guy's life you know? And another thing, you didn't, you didn't say, like I worked B.O.'s plane, make no difference to me whether it's B.O.'s plane or anybody else,

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it was a airplane and everyone is treated exactly the same, you know? We didn't favor, oh this is B.O.'s plane—the same thing, same—everybody's thing was given the best ride for the dollar, we used to say. It's a long way out there.

[END OF SIDE B; END OF TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE A; BEGIN TAPE 2]

[Crosstalk]

OL: I was going to say, so how long did you stay in Italy in total?

Dawn Russell (DR): Ask again?

OL: Sure, how long, how long were you in Italy?

RN: We got in Italy in 19—in February 1944 and we stayed there until October 1943 we left Italy.

OL: Okay, so since this is for the Bronx African American History Project we also want to hear about your life when you returned to the States. Did you go to the Bronx after you returned home?

RN: No. When I came home we lived in Queens and I worked there—like I said, I wound up working for the T.A. the Transit Authority and then we moved to the Bronx after the city condemned the house, the building--.

CM: When was that?

RN: That was in 1971.

OL: Okay. What did you do for the transit authority?

RN: I worked in a money train.

CM: Maybe if we could just back out, I know in a previous conversation we don't want to think that Mrs. Nesbitt is a bad housekeeper, that they condemned your home. Maybe you could tell us a little bit why your home was condemned?

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[Laughter]

RN: Yes, they condemned my house because they wanted to build York College, so they acquired all the property around—all around there. Our house was on 159<sup>th</sup> Street between Archer and Liberty Avenue. The science building is there now. Where my house was.

OL: Did you own that house?

RN: Yes. Saint Monica's was the church we was trying to think of. I knew it'd come to me eventually.

OL: Did they compensate you for the house?

RN: Yes, they did. But they could've did us better than what they did. I mean, they made you go out and hire a lawyer, when they could've offered us a fair market price for the house and we could've given it to them—but they would, they give you less than market so you have to go hire a lawyer that's got to do all—and then he gets his cut and then so--.

OL: You're still talking about your parent's house in Queens?

RN: Yes, well, it was my parent's house originally, then when my father died and me and my mother both owned the house together.

CM: So when you came back you married?

RN: Yes, eventually.

[Laughter]

RN: Yes that was in—when did we get married? 1951 I got married.

OL: Okay so there were a few years--.

RN: Yes.

OL: Well one thing before we get to the Bronx, one thing I'd like to hear about is, after you served in the military and you came home, did you receive the same kind of benefits that white

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servicemen had? Did you feel like there was discrimination based on the kind of military benefits that were given out?

RN: I can't, I can't say that—I can't really say that, I can't really say that I really thought that they did. Because a lot of things I think I didn't do, I should've done. So I can't—now I find it hard to be too critical. I think I could've did a lot better, knowing what I know, well that's always the way, you know but anyway, but no, I didn't, I didn't—except for jobs, except it was pretty tough—it was pretty hard. And by the time, now I have another friend, a couple of friends that stayed with aviation, the way they did it was, when we got out of the Army in '45 they stayed in the Reserve, some of them stayed in the Army, but most of them stayed Reserve, the Air Reserve, you know? And that way they got that flying time and by that time Truman had desegregated the Armed Forces and they went to all the different outfits. And so by 1948, and I went out in '45 yes, 19—by 1948 the Air Force thing was [inaudible], I was in the Army Air Force but by 1948 it was the Air Force and they were pretty well integrated. And then the airlines started doing business, you know, in the '50s, and, and then what happened was— [inaudible] I didn't bring the guys pictures I could've shown you some of them pilots, the original pilots that sued Continental Airlines because they wouldn't hire black pilots, you see. And Continental, they picked Continental, none of them would do it, but they picked Continental because that was the smallest airline. The other airlines were too big and had too much power—too strong so they picked Continental, that was the nearest one they figured-- . So they put Continental, and then they had the suit and Continental gave in, before they never really went to trial, they'd lose the case, so Continental started hiring pilots. After that they started, Continental hired, but then the other airlines gradually started and then they started to hire the mechanics too because, like I said the comic strip in the paper, if you, if you imagine getting on an airplane and seeing a black pilot sitting there, get off-- . If you saw a black mechanic, if he wasn't doing any

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sleeping, alright, but you do anything other than sleeping you wouldn't get on that plane. You know so, so that's the way it was but by 1951 they really had changed. By that time it was too late to me—I couldn't go, I couldn't go back. I got married, I took a refresher course in aviation, but I knew a guy that did. My friend there went up in Maine, he did pretty good but he took some hard nights. He was working for the Post Office, you know, and he still kept with that aviation, he wouldn't give up, he wouldn't give up no kind of way. And he wound up working for the FAA, now he retired as a FAA inspector, you know, he lives up in Maine now. We call him the original Tuskegee airman. He could tell you what they had for lunch. A guy boy, that was—I talk to him all the time, we're tight. Because we both come from New York. He come from New York too.

OL: So you, your house was condemned and you moved—what part of the Bronx did you move to?

RN: We moved to Co-Op City. Originally they called us the Section 4, but we wasn't ready because our house in Queens wasn't settling. So we waited and then until our house—then we moved to Section 5 in Co-Op City.

CM: What was that like? Was there any evidence of discrimination in terms of segregating African Americans, in particular buildings? Or the process of admitting people?

RN: I heard that there was? I heard that they steered most of the blacks to Section 5. That's what I heard. I heard, but when I came there, I know I was on for Section 4, but I wasn't ready to move at that time. But they still, they had a thing going—they weren't—the best of them were in Section 1 and 2. So they thought they was going to keep it—I hear—sort of a private community over there. But naturally of course now it's not. Majority's black now in Co-Op City.

CM: And at this time you were working for the Transit Authority?

RN: Yes.

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CM: And what capacity was that again?

RN: As a collecting agent, a revenue collecting agent. Go around picking up money at the booths. Taking at the bus depot, taking money to the Federal Reserve Bank.

CM: And what did they call that in layman's terms? You had mentioned earlier the money train?

RN: Money train, the money train, the money train yes. We had 7 of them—8--we had 8 money trains originally. Now I think they use most everything from trucks now and they don't have tokens so half the battle—but those days we had 8, 8 money trains. [inaudible]

OL: So what was the Bronx like in the early 70s? This is the early 70s now right?

RN: Yes. Well it was hard—well it wasn't hard, I think it was harder with my children.

Especially my older son. Going to school. You couldn't go around, you couldn't go to Pelham Bay Park. You know--?

CM: Why is that?

RN: Well the Italians would have a fit, you know. You couldn't stray off the beaten path there you know. What was that school my son went to? He had a lot of trouble over there. What's that school over there, the high school? Anyway, they had a lot of trouble in school. And they tell me, I didn't know it at the time, they tell me that, that, that, that restaurant, it used to be a candy store at not at Pelham Bay Park, at jeez I'm having a complete lapse of memory.

OL: It'll come to you.

RN: I really must be getting old. But anyway, they had trouble they didn't even want you in the store. In the candy store.

CM: So now you moved to Co-Op City, we sort of glossed over, you having children, you and your wife having children. So how many children did you have and what were their names? Is there anything interesting about the birth of those--?

RN: Well I have 4 children.

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CM: Their names?

RN: The oldest was Lorraine. Then I had a son David, a son Kenneth, and a daughter Shonda.

That's Shonda she's the baby.

CM: So they're all born in the Bronx?

RN: Shonda was the only one born in the Bronx.

CM: Was anything unique about that?

RN: Yes, the only thing that was unique was trying to get from here to get [inaudible] Hospital.

When she was born. You know trying to get down the parkway, the TA looked like they didn't want to give me time off. Talking about well, you, you put in for—got to put in a call to tell them I wasn't coming in that night for emergency leave you know? Emergency—which I had the days you know? So I called, I told them—they wanted to go, well you took off, I said yes because my wife she was sick one day she was sick or whatever--.

OL: She was pregnant.

RN: Yes, right. And then, I said look, I'm telling, I'm telling you where I'm going, goodbye.

You know, yes? That was, that was too funny. But outside of that, course then my oldest, I got an older son down in Washington, he's doing fine. He was in the Marines, he's doing fine. He's—worked the metro in Washington.

CM: So your family has this strong military tradition then? Your father, you, and your son?

RN: And my brother. I had a brother--my brother was in Korea, my young—youngest brother. He's dead now, he died of multiple sclerosis. But he, he went to Korea and then, then I had another brother next to me, he was in the Navy. In the Second World War, and he was out in Portland, but he's dead now too.

OL: What did your wife do for a living when you were in the Bronx?

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RN: Oh, she was a housewife, crossing guard in the Bronx, yes. But she, I, I prefer her at home with the kids. We had a tribe you know? Somebody had to be with them you know?

CM: So here you are moving into this brand new development, a large co-op, I guess the largest probably in the world.

RN: In the world yes.

CM: And what was it like for you and your family during that early period?

RN: I thought it was—I was used to a house. And I still like my—I like my house, my private house. I was used to my car being outside, always had a car. A car outside the door when I went to go out the car was either in the backyard or out in the street in front of the house. But now my car is a block and a half away. I got to remember where I put it. People in the hallway. I couldn't stand all that noise. I was used to my own house, you know? You had to come out in the hallway, the elevator, I said I'll never get used to this. I wouldn't buy, I wouldn't buy a house at my age but--.

CM: So how did Co-Op City evolve, I guess when you first moved there, there were probably a few stores and businesses?

RN: No stores, the only store—in Section 5 they had a store they probably threw up a little co-op store in the garage, where that garage is in Section 5, the first store they had a little, little co-op garage. At night you—they had a bus that would come over in Section 5, you had to get off and walk from, from the bank, and no parking. Cars would park all up in the front doors and it was a mess, it was a mess up here.

OL: We've interviewed people who lived in the Bronx in the 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s and the people who had been in the Bronx from the 60s and then to the 70s have talked about how it changed. What you told us earlier about, you know, having people in your neighborhood who

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watched over you as kids—that kind of experience we heard about that in the Bronx in the 50s and 60s but then in the 70s we've heard accounts that life really changed and it was difficult--.

RN: Yes, there was nobody watching over—you had to watch over your, your own. They'd watch out for each other. Well now we know it's not that way today. Because even today, when you go to building meetings, I guess that's why I'm not a joiner. I won't join, they get too mad at me, especially my family, I won't join—the American—they want me to join that thing. The Tuskegee Airmen, I never would join the Tuskegee Airmen, and they get this guy I know Shepherd, he gets too mad at me, that I wouldn't join. I said later for them bunch of phonies. I get too mad at them. I don't want to be bothered. Because, I look at the way people, like they do in these organizations, like I look at these meetings. The first thing in Co-Op City—they talked about the company River Bay. They expect River Bay to take care of their children. River Bay didn't have those children, you know? They can't—River Bay can't even fix a faucet, how they going to take care of your children, you know? And the people that run River Bay, the way I look at it, these people all have their kids going to good schools. Or they looking at—you have to look at—the people there themselves, the parents who would get together and say we are going to do this, we going to do that and this okay—they don't respect—you laid up and had them kids. River Bay didn't have them. But they can't—they must dump their kids off on somebody. That, that's--.

CM: How did you feel about the education of your children in the Bronx in that area, what schools?

RN: A lot of trouble. Lot's of trouble, well I think they're having that trouble everywhere. Especially my grandson, he's catching particular hell. He's been to every kind of school you could think of. Mother puts him in all kind special schools and training and everything, you know, yes but trying to get you know--. But I, I, I think the whole education system, I really do, I

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really think it's really broken down, I really do. You know? And I think the biggest problem in school--one of the problems is that, the children are out of control. And I think the children are out of control at home. I really, I really do that's how I really think. I think so—you send these kids to school and you think the teacher can work miracles—teacher can't work miracles with these kids that no—some have no conception-- . Put them on the bus and everything. Now, when we was coming along, well with our kids, you didn't do anything. You know, I mean we were—my mother was in charge with 6 of us and she was in charge of everybody, she would of wait 'til your father come home-- . She told him what you did, he really, you got to pray she didn't. But she didn't have any situations-- . And I always felt the same way too. When I came home, because I might go out and drop dead today, tomorrow you mean my wife can't handle her kids because I'm not there? You know what I mean, it's got to be law and order. But some of these kids boy, the kids are raising theirselves you know? I just look at them-- . And then the teachers don't care. Why should they? They're going home, their kids are going to a nice school somewhere, they sit with these idiots, you know they don't care.

OL: So some of the representations of the Bronx in the 70s, you know there's the image of the Bronx burning and the influx of drug use, what kinds of dangers and difficulties did you see in terms of social life in the Bronx?

RN: Well I think that—I think that drug use destroyed everywhere. The Bronx, Queens, like I said, you could lay down on Northern Boulevard when I was a kid and nobody-- . I'm afraid to go out there and look at the old neighborhood now. They say look at that old man, he must have some money on him, kill you out there you know. But the drugs destroyed. Because now in my day, you might see a drunk, even in Harlem, you might see a drunk, would be drinking—watch your mouth, watch your mouth there's a woman, watch your mouth, you know they would say. [inaudible] In Co-Op City we look at them, those kids stand at the shopping malls and places,

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cursing, yelling—it must be their relatives, don't they need their relatives, their mother, don't somebody hear these kids you know. And whose kids are they? You know? That's what we—I wonder you know? But that's trouble, you, you, you got to put the blame where it's due. A lot of us—maybe it's, maybe my days back when I remember how hard we came over how much. It's hard to accept the way these people just don't seem to care. You know, and let people blame other people. You know, you can't blame—people look after own. And that's what's wrong with Co-Op City, they laid back in the cut, they could care less. They had an election, [inaudible] people in our building, there's 384 people in that building and I bet you a 100 didn't go. For their, their, President, or the Board of Directors or people—they go on out, you know cut their eye at you and walk on past. Apathy, that's what apathy.

CM: You know, one of the things I guess that makes me sort of reflective I guess in terms of yesterday being Memorial Day and a—this morning on the news we hear that President Obama, and many of us never thought we would see a President Obama and we hear that's there's a judge a woman of Puerto Rican from the Bronx who is being nominated for the U.S. Supreme Court--. What have been some of the positive changes during your times? Things that perhaps you and others could only dream of?

RN: Oh, I've seen so many. God the first thing or the last thing was President Obama, I couldn't believe it. I never believe he had a chance. I would've bet your money, that's a wasted vote--. He didn't have a chance you know? No more so than I think Thompson being mayor of New York, you know against Bloomberg you know? But he became President, then I said, he seems to have the unique ability, Obama to look like—to really think things out in some kind of way. You know, I, I give him credit for that. But then I say well he's half white too because you have already the other half black because that's only if he messes up. But I was too surprised. And I do, I see a lot of change, I can't say, I won't say—wherever I see black people, I go to the airport

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and I see black pilots and then I look on the thing I see black—every kind of, every kind of job

and you know then I think remember us—when they would tell you, they used to tell women that the women would stay right at millinery in high school. Making hats, that's all you study. And if, but look at them today. Look at them today, look where they're at. You know, and I look at it, I said go ahead. I feel good, I'll tell you the truth, I never thought, I never thought I'd get to see, I said well look at this-- . Yes, it's very good.

OL: Well is there anything that we haven't asked you about that you would like to share with us?

RN: I'm trying to think back, I think you pretty there covered everything I could think of you know? As far as the day, days in the Bronx and all that. And I must say like, even in Co-Op City, at my age now, I'm just quite content. You know? I'm not looking for—not to hit the lottery and then I'd go to a condominium, but, but outside of that I'm quite content. And luckily to be fairly healthy for an old man, falling to pieces but-- . I get along pretty good, I walk go around, I can't smell the roses that well but I know they should smell.

[Laughter]

RN: Outside of that, I really have no complaints you know? My, my kids are doing alright, you know?

CM: I know you take a lot of pride in that.

RN: Yes, oh yes. What else is there left? You know what I mean? There's nothing else—when you see the kids coming and grandkids with their crazy self. I think they're all crazy but—most of the time I pretend like I'm paying attention to them, you know they're all, they're all doing pretty good. You know they're doing pretty good. They always, one disappoint, one some kind of way, you know but that's okay.

OL: Well thank you so much Mr. Nesbitt.

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RN: Well thank you very much for asking me. It was very enjoyable. I enjoyed myself very much.

CM: We did too.

OL: Thank you.

[END OF SIDE A; END OF TAPE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]