

## Voices of Veterans Interview with Tuskegee Airman Claude Platte

Date: February 2, 2006

Location: Texas General Land Office

Interviewer #1: Sharon Mooney

Interviewer #2: Mark Loeffler

**Interviewer #1:** My name is Sharon Mooney and I am here as part of the Texas General Land Office Voices of Veterans Program. Today is Thursday, February 2, 2006. We are here at the Texas General Land Office; I will be interviewing Capt. Claude Platte who is one of the Tuskegee Airmen as part of that program. The purpose of the VOV program is for the preservation of historical information related to WWII. We are so excited to have you here Mr. Platte. I thank you very much to coming to us and sharing your experiences with us. If you would start out by giving us some background history about yourself and how you ended up in the military and part of the Tuskegee project.

**Capt. Platte:** Ok. I can start by telling you about my early childhood days which was in Ft. Worth, Texas on the South side. One of the main things I remember that encouraged me was in a situation where there were colored signs and white signs and black fountains and white fountains. And, I had been taught that when I saw a colored sign that is where I was supposed to be or drink water. One day I saw a little white boy drinking out of the colored fountain-the black fountain, his father scolded him, but doing so, I became curious. Why couldn't I drink out of the white fountain? And what was wrong? When no one was looking, I decided that I would drink out of the white fountain. And when I did, my biggest shock and surprise was — the water was the same, there was no difference. Then I began to wonder why was it that the restrooms had colored signs on it and white signs. Because I thought there was a reason for it. So, I went and looked into the white restroom. And the only difference I saw between the whites and the blacks, was that the colored side was a little dirtier than the whites. Then I began to realize then that really it was more or less a situation where I was believing that they were doing it for my benefit and I couldn't do anything else.

Another interesting step/thing that I made was, I was standing out in the front yard one day and I saw an airplane hovering very low and I could see the pilot flying over and it dawned on me that I could go and see the other side of the area, outside the segregated area, or even go all over the world if I wanted to see what it looked like so I decided this is what I wanted to do, is fly. When I decided to fly of course my mother wasn't very interest in my flying because she thought it was dangerous. My father didn't care. So I had opportunities to help him, he helped me rather, to make model airplanes. And I kept on with my training learning about how to fly, regardless of what they told me. Well it wasn't until I went to high school. In high school we had what they called a Negro History Class. The City of Ft. Worth had given the high school permission to use this as a credit. From that class we had to get all our material from Pittsburg Courier, Chicago Defender, and Ebony Magazine because they didn't have any books. From this class I learned that there were other things that blacks and negroes were doing, like, there was Jesse Owens, there was also people like the Mill brothers, and it was also very

interesting I noticed was - that encouraged me was Bo Jangles with Shirley Temple dancing — these things encouraged me and I began to realize then that I was in a segregated area and it wasn't like this in the North.

When I arrived at Tuskegee my biggest shock when I got there was, Tuskegee had the only VA hospital for Negroes in the country; they were all manned by black doctors and white nurses and so forth. The other thing that was very interesting was Dr. George Washington Carver was there. Because of George Washington Carver and the peanut, I got an opportunity to see people like President Roosevelt, Lena Horn, Joe Lewis and all these VIP people that come through Tuskegee on tour so to speak. This was very encouraging to me; even school was much better than what I had gone to. Well I was still interested in flying, but I enrolled in what they call mechanical industries because I wanted to be an engineer. At about 1939, the Army Air Corps. and the War Department decided they needed training because Pres. Roosevelt decided he need to do something for the security of the country. And he chose them in order to organize this program. They in return got 6 black colleges to take part in the CPT program – and Tuskegee was one of them. In that program that's where I was able to earn my private license, a commercial license, and a flight instructor's license.

In the CPT program one of the most interesting facts that I learned from that was G.L. Washington, who was a Massachusetts Institute Technology Professor carried me over to Maxwell AFB to get a physical. On that physical I flunked it. He sent me back to Tuskegee, told me to go back to Tuskegee and get a nice rest, he told me to get up early the next morning and return back to him. And he gave me another physical and I passed it. And I was shocked, I couldn't figure out why I couldn't pass it the first time. He told me it was because I was taller in the morning than I was in the afternoon. He said, "Not only was I taller in the morning, but every one was, everybody is taller in the morning than they were in the afternoon." I didn't believe it, I still was shocked, I couldn't understand it because I wanted to be a tall person, I was conscious of my height. I wanted to be a six-footer; I wanted to play basketball, football, and all this and that. I had been trying to grow and yet and still I hadn't gotten anywhere. But anyway he explained it to me. He said, "Look I will tell you why. You stand on your feet all day." Your feet are supporting a lot of weight something has to give. And usually you lose a fraction of it, you don't lose no yards or anything like that, you lose a fraction. When I go back to bed, I return to my original height. That's what actually happens. So then I realized then that actually I didn't grow anything, I just learned something about what I should have learned before, that normally everyone is shorter at one time or another. I had a hard time believing it. And I use to look at little balloons. I took a balloon and I would press it and I would see it go back in shape. I got a bat and compared it with a baseball bat and see how it would peel off. I realized evidently the same thing was taking place but it was so small I that didn't see it. I realized then there are certain things that could be measured but they can't be seen.

So from that physical my first flight – my first instructor was from Greenville, Mississippi. Of course I was very alert and aware of the fact of hanging and they would lynch people and so forth, Mississippi was one of the places I that I really had in my mind that I really didn't want to be bothered with because of the lynching of Emmett Teal and this type of thing.

But anyway, he turned out to be my best instructor. When I met him he was kind of uneasy with me and I was uneasy with him of course. My first flight I was flying he told me I would be at an altitude of 3,000 feet and all I was going to do was fly straight and level, make some medium turns, 90 degrees, left and right. And that's all I was going to do. But he didn't tell me he was going to close the throttle and shut down the engine. So when he did, it was dual controls, and I immediately pushed the throttle back forward, he'd pull it back, I'd push it forward, the third time I tried and I couldn't. From that point on, I don't remember anything; I remember everything was blank; all I remember is just starring. So finally when I realized the plane was still in the air, it was flying, then I began to relax a little. And just as I became relaxed I became conscious of what was around me and I could hear him say all I want you to do is fly straight and level, make certain turns. Then I looked at myself and I was in a cold sweat and I was real tense. And I realized then about fear. That I had blanked out everything around me but that one thing. So I overcame that.

The other thing that I realized about fear in my life was this thing called immelman dive and roll out. Well he did one and told me to do it. I fell out of it. He kept me up an hour and every time I would fall out of it. That afternoon I came down and he didn't tell me anything, but I assumed that I was going to be eliminated from the program. So I knew I had to do that or else I wouldn't be flying anymore. So then I decided that I was going to do the maneuver the next day. So the next day he dove, pulled up and did the maneuver. He told me to do it. I dove, pulled up and he was shocked. "Do another one!" I did another one. Perfect. Now, the reason I didn't do it the first time was...fear. When the plane was inverted the only thing you have across your lap is a safety belt to keep you from falling out. So I was holding onto the plane so that safety belt wouldn't let me go, I was going to make sure. Once I decided to put confidence and faith in that belt, then I forgot about the safety belt, then I was able to do the maneuver.

I went through that program. Then another thing I learned was, I had to start taking my flight instructor's rating. My flight instructor's rating — in that course, we had to go dual cross-country from Tuskegee to Bessemer to Birmingham. I did well on the dual. But when I did solo, I made my first stop at Bessemer, the time I arrived was perfect, all my position reports were perfect, no problem at all. Got there took off going to Birmingham. On my way to Birmingham I did something I shouldn't have done, I started daydreaming because everything was going so smoothly. Suddenly I realized, that oh gee wiz I better see where I am going. I looked at the compass and on the compass it has 2 little nines. One is a small nine and one is a large nine. The large nine is 90 degrees; the other one is just 9 degrees. I said oh gee, I was all off course, that's the other nine, so I turned that plane to go to 90 degrees. I said oh no, no I was right the first time, so I turned back to the small nine. By this time I looked over and I was over a restricted area. I said oh my goodness and the only thing I could think about was I started looking for planes to come and shoot me down because you are not supposed to be over a restricted area. And I said oh my goodness how am I going to get out of this? So I just forgot about where I was until I got out of the area. So as soon as I got out of the area, on the plane I was flying, the gas gauge is measured by a little bobble thing and it was down low. It was getting dark. So I said oh no! I'm getting low on gas. So now I said I can't land this plane at night because I can't see. I can do well, just barely well do it when I've got lights on the runway. So I saw a tractor, a man on his tractor plowing his field. And without thinking I

just landed the plane and I taxied. He ran off and left his tractor. After I turned around and stopped he came back. I said I just want some fuel for this plane. I had no idea, not thinking about there was a difference in octane, whether it would run or not. All I wanted was to put fuel in it. So he had a five-gallon can so he gave it to me. So anyway when I took it off and started pouring gas in there a piece of paper came out. And I snatched the paper and spilled the gasoline and the reason I did that was cause' I thought if that paper had gotten into that gas tank the little hole where the gasoline goes out to the engine it would get over there and I still wouldn't get no gas to the engine. So that's why I was shocked about this paper. But anyway, I got it all gassed up. I was looking around and I saw a 13-year-old white boy — by this time there was a large crowd around me. I said the 13-year-old white boy I thought was the smartest one around here. I said now look, I am going to start the plane by pulling its prop through then I said all I want you to do — I'm going to crack this throttle once the engine starts all you are suppose to do is close it, don't do anything — just close it — just stand here. Now you understand what you are supposed to do because I don't want to get hurt and I don't want you to get hurt. He said, "I understand, I understand." Shaking his head yes. So I pulled the prop through and the thing started up and he opened the throttle and took off. The plane started running and I grabbed the strut. I had to crawl under the strut; I lost my watch tore my pants, crawled in and closed the throttle. Got in the plane and took off. I forgot to pay the man for the gasoline, I forgot to say thank you for what he had done. And he had already told me that Birmingham was...that way. And all I did was go that way. And I took off. So when I landed in Birmingham the Airport Manager came out there and he jumped all over me. "Where you been?" "How come you didn't use your radio?" All this and that. I said Sir my radio wasn't working. It was working I didn't know I couldn't call. That was my excuse. As a result he took my word for it. So I stayed over night. I was afraid to go back at night because I would get lost again. So the next morning I went back to file a flight plan and you had to have a flight plan. He said, "Now look...I'm not giving you a flight plan any more. Yesterday you got lost. You had the Civil Air Patrol looking for you, the police out looking for you, and you didn't even call the radio or anything so you're on your own this time. You go back." So I went all the way back to Tuskegee. So I got back to Tuskegee and I told my instructor I said Sir, I decided to stay over night because it was getting dark and I didn't want to take a risk landing. And so that was the reason I am late. I didn't tell him why. So he said, "Okay then." So that was that.

Then I became a flight instructor. When I became a flight instructor, the biggest problem I had was that they would always line up all the cadets according to their height. I'm the shortest one, the smallest one. So I always got the midgets, which I didn't like. But anyway, along the line, they gave me two Lieutenants. They were six-footers, weighed about 100-200 pounds so forth as students. One of them I had no problem with. The other one, oh, he was cocky. He was going to tell me how to fly. And to break him of this habit, I told him we were going to do a steep turn at a low altitude. When we make the steep turn just keep the turn. I said, "Keep on the turn. Hold it." And while he was doing his turn there is a mixed control that you had to have (*can't understand*). So I eased off the throttle and pulled the mixed control back and I eased throttle back so the power decreased. And he was stressing. Keep it uphill! Hold the altitude! He was fighting, stressing, and praying into a spin. O my goodness what an experience. Oh get me out, get me out! Well he froze on the stick and I realized then and then I had to drive. I grabbed

the stick. I couldn't get the control out of his hands so I had to take my foot and kick the stick out of his hand and break the floor-wheel. When I recovered, I just barely cleared the treetops. The wheels were barely touching. I learned a lesson, I learned never to try and teach anyone at a low altitude. I taught him a lesson, that he wasn't the best pilot after all. So these are the things that I tell. To make a long story short, I had a problem with what I did.

After the program closed I had to report back to my draft board. They stopped drafting, but I still had to check in. So I go back to my draft board and I tell them, they have a 10% quota in the service, they can't take any more blacks, and they weren't taking any more draftees, and I was going to Ohio to be a Doctor. He said, "Negro if you pass a physical you are going to the service — you can go in one week or two weeks. I just got angry and said send me in a week's time. So at that time I went back. My father took me over to Dallas. When I got over to Dallas, my father saw a policeman and he asked him how to get to Love Field because I was flying to San Antonio. And I sat down on my suitcase. And he looked down at me and said, "Nigger when I'm talking, stand up." So I stood up at attention and I did. So he told my father how to get to San Antonio. So when I got to San Antonio it was still segregated, just by the time we got our things we had what they called a race riot. The reason for it was...I don't know if you are familiar with this cadence we have, but I call them monkey drills. Where you do a lot of cadence, real loud, and singing and this type of thing. We were in the white area with all this noise, late at night because the sergeant teaching us was pressuring us. So they came out and started throwing rocks. So we started throwing rocks back. But I on the other hand, I did something maybe I shouldn't have done. I went to the barracks; I didn't take part because I wasn't going to be involved. But the next morning I suffered the same thing, he shipped all of us out. As punishment for me he sent me to Biloxi, Mississippi. So I get to Biloxi, Mississippi. And in Biloxi, Mississippi, while I was there, I was working in the armor room. They decided to start up the cadet program again. So the sergeant that was in the segregated area he knew a white sergeant up in the white area and he knew they were going to start up this cadet program again. So he asked me if I would be a test case to get into the program. I said oh I don't want to get in because I'm getting out in a year or two. He said, "Oh you go on and take it." I said okay, so I went up there, took the examination and passed it. Once I passed it, they decided that I couldn't go into the cadet program because I was a draftee; I wasn't in the regular army. So they called the called the training commander, a four star general, to give permission for me to go in as a draftee. He wouldn't approve of it. It came back to me; they sent me up there again. So the second time it came back the first Lieutenant said you've got it made, sign it. So I signed it. I said wait a minute! After I signed it. What guarantee did I have? He said, "Don't you worry about it, you'll make it." So he had tricked me to sign to volunteer as regular army. When I arrived at Randolph Field, the first thing they told me was that I was going to be a cook. I said, cook, ok. It didn't bother me because in my pocket I had orders saying what I was suppose to do. So I stayed there. So the next day they started processing me in. As I went in through the office, the master sergeant took me up there and he was fixing to sign me in as a cook — he looked at my order and said, "this says cadets?" I said, "I know it." So he goes and talks to the First lieutenant who was the Adjutant. The Adjutant looked at me and went into the other office right next to him with which the commanding officer was a Captain and I could hear him say, "We have somebody up here (and I could hear

him) who says he is suppose to be in the cadet program, what should we do?" I am assuming what they decided was for them to bring me on down here. So the First Lieutenant took me down to the cadet area. The Master Sergeant went and got my bags. But when he was taking me down to the cadet area the First Lieutenant was in a jeep. He was sitting here and I was sitting next to him with my arms closed, smiling and laughing. The reason I was laughing and smiling was, this is the first time I had an officer, white chauffer me cause' I had always been sitting in the back of the bus. (*Capt. Platte laughs*). So I was enjoying it. So anyway I went there and they put me in a room and I stayed there about three hours before they decided to process me in.

Just one or two things happened while I was there. They had a system at Randolph where on Fridays they would let Squadron F go swimming. They would drain the pool and put fresh water in. Then all the others would use it that morning. Well I was in this class, so I was there with them. I was timid; I've always been timid. And I knew I wasn't suppose to get in the water with these white males and females so I was standing trying to debate what I was going to do. And one of the cadets said come on Platte, come on, come on. So I — man, and started running to get in the water. To me, it looked like before my foot touched that water — all the males and females got out of the water — just left the water. One of the cadets asked me "What do you think about them getting out of the water?" I said, "Oh they thought the black was going to dissolve in this water and get on them I guess." And that was my answer to it.

Well when I started off, they didn't know it; they put me in an AT6. I had flown an AT6 as a flight instructor. They took me out of the AT6 and put me in a PT 13 because they just wanted to make sure I got through the program. Which was a mistake. So when they put me in the program they found out I had some flight instructor time. So at that point on, they didn't give me any dual; they had all the white instructors, some from Europe, Britain, England, and so forth — to fly with me to see how I could fly. It so happened I had gotten to the point where I was pretty good in flying. And I would do what we called acrobats, and I would do inverted snaps and snap rolls on top of loop and finish — unusual for an air show. I could do all that. Hammerhead stalls — I would try my best to scare them, but I didn't do anything. But anyway, I got through that. Then they made me a Cadet Lieutenant, another thing that surprised me. So they made me a Cadet Lieutenant. So when I was a Cadet Lieutenant I could go to the movies with them, with the whites. So when I went to the movies the first night, just about the time I got inside the building and got ready to sit down — there was an enlisted man sitting there and he said, "Agggghh...you can't sit there." And he snatched his girlfriend up. I didn't realize what it was all about until he snatched his girlfriend up. He said, "You can't sit beside her." I was so embarrassed I just sat down because by that time everybody in the area was looking in that area where the noise was. So I was so glad when the lights went out, so I could relax. So of course when the movie was over, when I was going out again the lights came back on — ya know I was still kind of uneasy. So that's what I went through as far as the cadets were concerned.

Well another thing that happened too was my instructor in basic asked me where did I want to go. I told him I wanted to go to twin engine. In twin engines I went to the Barksdale AFB. We were suppose to be flying B25s. Before I got there, they had told me that I would not stay there I would go to Williams AFB. I stayed there 2 weeks waiting for them to ship me out. In the meantime, I would go down to the base trying to see any

other Negroes and I never did see them in the daytime. Every time I would go to the PX they hesitated to wait on me or hesitated to go to the movies and all. But I felt odd. I felt uneasy. So I decided I'm going to find out where they are. Uhh — some blacks on this base. So I went down to the area, and it was segregated. And the Master Sergeants and NCO's all they do is stay there during the daytime drinking beer and playing games. That's all they did all day long. They wouldn't go out. At nighttime they would come out to clean up the base. But then they would go back and I wouldn't see them in the daytime. I said, "gee wiz, this is what's going on and they don't know all about this."

Anyway, I went to Williams AFB, got to Williams AFB, and I finished single engines, 551s and everything and one of the interesting things is that they didn't fly me, and I still don't understand why that was. I know one thing; we had to fly from Williams AFB to Mexico to Oklahoma. We went there in formation tour, 19 of us; it was actually 20 of us. So when got to Oklahoma. They didn't tell me I could go out, I should have gone out, but I just stayed in my room and nobody associated with me until the next day. When I got ready to leave we had to take off in intervals of 15 minutes. The reason is so you can be solo on the way back. So they made me next to the last one. Which means I took off when it was getting dark and they all took off out of sight. So I had a little experience. So I had this 51, so I opened that 51. So when I got back to Mexico, I called in for landing instructions and I had passed everyone. He asked me if I wanted to make a combat approach or a regular rectangle like approach. So the instructor said, "no he can't make any combat he's a student." Anyway, I landed and they all landed. But when I left there going back to Williams AFB believe it or not I was last. They made sure I didn't pass them no more. (*Capt. Platte laughs.*) So I went through that, I finished and got my wings. Then I was assigned to General Davis' outfit.

**Interviewer #2:** Sir. Can I ask you when you got your wings? Do you remember?

**Capt. Platte:** It was 19...I was in the class of 48B, so it had to be close to about '48 because I didn't, because I was in the class of 48B so I must have gone in in '46 because they started the cadet program in '47 and I graduated in '48. That's what it was, '48.

**Interviewer #2:** So like that summer of '48?

**Capt. Platte:** Yes. And then I was sent to B.O. Davis' outfit. I was the only Second Lieutenant on the base...the only one. It didn't bother me, but I wasn't part of the elite group. That's the group that did all this fighting over there...the group that formed a click. That's what it was. And so of course it didn't bother me because I was very friendly, because Davis was my ROTC instructor at Tuskegee and I knew him very well. I knew Chappie James cause' he was a flight instructor. I knew all of them, yet in still that was our relationship.

**Interviewer #2:** What was Davis like?

**Capt. Platte:** He was a good Commander, but then no one liked him too well because he was strict. Very strict, and no one liked him, but he was a very good officer. In fact, he's the one that was the reason why they didn't lose no bombers. What actually happened

was he told the group, “You will not leave those bombers, you will stay there, you will not be taking off dog fighting becoming heroes, you stay there and protect those bombers.” What actually happened was — and I don’t know how he figured this out. What actually happened was — see the bombers go in there and but when they have white escorts they would see the airplane take off. Then they had the enemy who would wait for this and come in and get the bombers. Davis kept us in there so they would not move until they came in so it would close up that hole. That’s the reason — they don’t tell you that — he never lost a bomber. So they had a system where up above that they had to come to them first and once they started in then they would attack. They couldn’t set up a flight pattern to shoot the bombers because they had to worry about being shot down. So they took a teaching away from that. And of course they got shot down and we had to go in. So that’s what actually happened.

So they came back, then up until that point the other thing that was very sad about the whole thing was — about two years before the war ended they started a bomber group. In that bomber group they were flying B-25s. They had all of them navigators, and all of them co-pilots, and all that were black, but just before the war ended, they didn’t go overseas. They were assigned to an all white unit. Davis was with the ones overseas. And the white unit didn’t allow them to go into the Officers Club. They didn’t let them get promotions until the group as a whole had a violent reaction to all this. And they put the whole group under house arrest. And kept them away. And it just so happened, and they decided they would forgive most of them except about four. They court marshaled them. But a lot of them were dismissed and the bomber outfit you hardly ever hear about, but I think they were very good because they had spent a lot of time flying because they didn’t want you to be part of the group. And it’s just like anything else they worked hard. And that’s another difference...an advantage why I think they weren’t any better, it was the practice they got. They wasn’t going to use them, they just sat them out there...and they got something they had never had before...a plane. They was having a good time. Always flying. Just doing this and that you see. So naturally they built up an efficiency. So naturally when they came up they had quite a bit of experience. Not in combat, but as far as being familiar with the airplane.

**Interviewer #1:** You said you started instructing people then when you got back to Williams? After you got your wings.

**Capt. Platte:** No, I was a flight instructor during the war. I taught the 99<sup>th</sup>. I taught them how to fly. Those are my students that I taught that went over. The war ended. They closed down the program where flight instructors and I was the 66<sup>th</sup> Army Primary Training. They closed that down. And they closed down a lot of military schools and so forth. Then they drafted me. They weren’t supposed to draft me, but there were more or less people already in there...they let the volunteers serve it. For the two years I was at Randolph Field they decided to start the cadet program up again. That’s when I came in.

**Interviewer #1:** So you were an instructor of the 99<sup>th</sup> before you went to Randolph.

**Capt. Platte:** Right.

**Interviewer #1:** Okay.

**Capt. Platte:** So when I got there I had a lot of time. See that's why when I got to Randolph they wouldn't fly with me because they realized I had had some time. They didn't know I had about 7,000 hours when I got there.

**Interviewer #1:** You were telling us about the flight instructor-ranking story. You were telling how they lined up the cadets and you would get the shortest ones because you were at the end. How many instructors were there who were instructing the cadets?

**Capt. Platte:** Well when it started off there were only ten cadets. That's all they had, just ten. Out of the ten on average I would say 5, 3, 4 — there was a greater washout than would actually go through. Then they decided they were supposed to have a squadron of 33. Then they decided to give them 20 and they never got beyond that. So we had 20 cadets come in every 2 months. So what actually happened was it took them a long time to even get a squadron set. Because each class was 5 or 4 or 6 graduating to make up 33 took some time. Then once they filled that up they started another group. So this is what actually happened. The cadets usually, most of them got out. Some of them had to go back into the service.

**Interviewer #1:** You were talking about that there was a difference between whether you were a draft board or a volunteer. Could you explain a little bit about that?

**Capt. Platte:** Okay, you see everybody has a certain age you have to register for the draft board. You have to register. And I understand now, if you don't register you will lose your benefits as far as working for the government or anything like that. You can't get out of it. You've got to register. So that's the way it was before the war. They called it drafting you. They have to sign up and they will call you to active duty. So that's the draft. You had to sign up when you became 18 and I don't care who you are or anything...you had to sign up. The only thing that I didn't like was that they gave exemptions to certain ones. Cause' I had a friend whose father was a doctor, and what they could do, he enrolled to take medicine...they exempted him from being drafted as long as he was in some course that they exempted from. As soon as the draft stopped he didn't get his doctor's degree he just got out of it. So you had quite a few of them use this type of thing. You had to have some defense program to be in to keep from being drafted. Cause' you were needed there, but if you didn't you were out of luck. So that's the difference between the draft board and...“what's it called subscription...or something like that.”

**Interviewer #1:** So when you went in originally you just volunteered.

**Capt. Platte:** No, I was a draftee.

**Interviewer #1:** Okay...you were a draftee.

**Capt. Platte:** When they started the program...what they did was...they put me in what they called a 66 Army Primary flight-training center...as a civilian. That prevented me from being drafted. Once I lost my position as a flight instructor, I immediately became vulnerable to be drafted again. And that's what happened. Normally I shouldn't have been drafted because they weren't drafting anyone. But I think they were just being prejudice, and that's why they drafted me. Actually, they weren't taking any more draftees because everyone that was in had to be volunteers. But they still had to be registered with the draft board. Even today they still have to campaign for it, they have a law for it. But if you don't sign up and they come after you — they don't realize it — way they explained to me, they have actually done them harm because they won't be able to get government jobs or things like that.

**Interviewer #1:** You indicated that you were in ROTC at some point in time?

**Capt. Platte:** Well Tuskegee had an ROTC program there but it wasn't actually the military. It was a different one. Davis came there in ROTC. The head of ROTC was actually — they had retired personnel to have an ROTC program. But it actually wasn't an ROTC program as far as the government was concerned cause' we just had some black uniforms and everything, but we taught everything as a ROTC group. Later they did join the program where ROTC is recognized by the Army. The Army has something to do with it now. But then they had someone to get the training but they weren't actually registered as ROTC students. All the instructors was officers and enlisted men that taught it, but before they had no contract with the government.

**Interviewer #1:** You talked about that there were different uniforms...that you kinda hinted at that there were different uniforms based on your level.

**Capt. Platte:** Okay. When I went in...I have a uniform...and I haven't seen but one white person with the uniform because they don't have very many of them. But they taught because of the civilian pilot nature in this program. It had a little wing. And we had a uniform. Okay I went from that to...that's what I used when I was instructing in the Primary. Like I said I was part of the 66<sup>th</sup>...I was still a civilian, but I was with the 66<sup>th</sup> Army Primary Training Unit. Then when I left there — that's why I said I shouldn't have been drafted; they assumed because I was discharged from that. Then I had to go back in and start as a private from the beginning and that's when I went up from that to an officer. *(Capt. Platte's son brings in a large wooden poster board with pictures & those present in the conference room look at the pictures as Capt. Platte explains them.)*

**Interviewer #1:** You got three licenses. What is the sequence you got those in?

**Capt. Platte:** Okay. The private license is a license where you can't fly passengers; you can only fly personally. You can't take up anyone. If you hurt anyone it's going to be just you. If you get a commercial license it's just like truck driving you can take passengers and you can do other things, like get paid for. Private license is just like you drive a car, like you get a student license, and that's it. An instructor's rating is just a rating that you get that tells you, you can teach them how to fly. They have what's called an instrument

rating...you teach them how to instrument rating, but you have to get a rating for that. The main difference between a commercial and a private is for one you can get paid and the other you can't. (*Capt. Platte's explains the story of a comrade killed in combat and another who was killed while flying from San Antonio to Washington, D.C. Their pictures are on the large wooden board that Capt. Platte brought to the interview.*)

**Interviewer #1:** When you were an instructor originally — before you went to Randolph — you were an instructor at Moton Field. Is that correct?

**Capt. Platte:** That's right.

**Interviewer #1:** I know in your bio that I found on the Internet it mentions that you trained over 992 pilots.

**Capt. Platte:** Well it wasn't that many. That's how much that was all total trained.

**Interviewer #1:** That was trained at Moton Field. Okay. Very good. How many do you think that you trained yourself?

**Capt. Platte:** I would say about 300.

**Interviewer #1:** Very good. Very good. And those all ended up being part of the 99<sup>th</sup> group.

**Capt. Platte:** Well...some of them didn't make it. See. I started out training them, but see like I said you have a washout rate. As I said what actually happened was that a class of ten, only five would probably get to the end to get the commission. Along the way they were either eliminated in primary then you had another phase of basic they had to go through, then they had advanced that they had to go through. They had to pass three phases before you could actually get your commission. And primaries is basically flying...basic flying. Then you go to basic, then it's a little more than basic flying because you have flaps and prop pitches and formation flying and night flying and this type of thing that you are introduced to. Then you go to advanced and you more or less with tactics that you are going to use in combat. See its three different phases: primary and then private license, then basic you have to get to the more or less advanced stage and then after you get to that then you get to combat training. You have to work up to it; you can't jump up to the top and then come down. You have to go in steps...so its three steps you go through.

**Interviewer #1:** Now as an instructor do you teach primary, basic, and advanced?

**Capt. Platte:** No, I just taught primary.

**Interviewer #1:** Okay.

**Capt. Platte:** The group that got through primary went to basic, but some of them didn't get through primary.

**Interviewer #1:** Right.

**Capt. Platte:** Now they might get — I had very few that were eliminated. Cause' I said at one time I got five students at a time and I got all five through at one time. The next time I only got three at a time. The next two at a time. See.

**Interviewer #1:** And your primary training; did I understand you that that lasted a couple of months?

**Capt. Platte:** The primary training, you mean primary training or primary teaching.

**Interviewer #1:** Primary training. The primary stage, like primary, basic, advanced?

**Capt. Platte:** You mean the teaching part? The primary program normally took about two weeks. What actually happened was, the primary program — they had to learn how to solo. They didn't know anything about a plane so you teach them basic flying; that is what I called climbing up, flying straight and level, making a few turns, and climbing back down to land. That's all that's basic, but there are certain things you have to be aware of that can cause you problems. For example, in climbing, you don't want to climb too steep because a plane will not climb straight up. It's what they call stalling. You don't want to land going too fast. Each one has something you've got to give them an idea as to what will happen if you don't do it this way. A landing is one. When you land an airplane, basically what you are doing you are losing all the flying speed, where it will not fly (*Capt. Platte claps*) and that point the plane is going to (*Capt. Platte claps again*) hit the ground. If you land it way up here...you are going to have to drop a long way. But the main thing is being able to control the airplane and knowing what to do and so forth. And you have what they called...a plane would fly with no power or it can fly with a lot of power. But you can't climb without power and you can't land with a whole lot of power. See the difference. So these things you've got to be able to show and demonstrate. That's what you're doing. What you're basically doing is showing them to do two things: just to climb a plane...what happens if you climb it too steeply or you don't climb it steep enough. If you don't climb steep enough, then you don't get up. If you climb it too steeply you won't make it. But you're climbing and showing them what to do to make it safe. Each step has its pro and cons about a problem. But its main thing is how to climb the plane, how to fly straight and narrow, how to make little turns, and how to come back to the ground. Now you can do something outside of the parameter of this (*Capt. Platte claps*) the plane is going to react on its own and you're going to have to know how to correct it. Control it.

**Interviewer #1:** Okay. Very good. So you taught the primary and then they go to basic and the advanced.

**Capt. Platte:** Now in basic they have primary flying, but now you have flaps. Because these planes have to have something to slow them down. You've got props that give you more pitch change, more power to take off. And you've got to know that you can't fly with all power or no power. All these things cause you to get flaps on there. You've got the landing gear. The landing gear has got to come up. So you can have no drag — reduce drag. These are things that are involved with heavier planes — you follow me? So that's basic. In basic you learn how to handle a large plane, not a small plane. Now, once you've got the two together, the final thing is how are you going to use this in combat. So now you've got to use the maneuvers they do in combat with these acrobatics that come in and so forth. But you've got to know how far you can go and how far you can't go. But you have gotten that in basic and primary. You follow the difference in it? So it's the same thing as when you get a car license. You get a student license to learn how; then once you get that you have to get your license; then if you want to drive a truck you get a commercial license. It's the same steps. You see what I'm getting at? So that's the way it is with flying.

**Interviewer #2:** Sir. I know we are kinda wanting to wrap up here in fifteen minutes or so. We have some questions on how the program was originally started and I think that's something we should cover and then take some more questions after that. Hopefully we will be able to get you out of here on your timetable.

**Interviewer #1:** I'm sorry I get so excited I could go for hours.

**Capt. Platte:** Basically, everything came in steps. The ideal thing was to start back with was — President Roosevelt first, because there was a war going on in Europe to Germany, Italy, and Great Britain were the main ones involved. Roosevelt decided they needed to have some kind of protection for this country just in case. So he got onto the Army Air Corps and the War Department and had to get Congress to appropriate money for this. But the Army Air Corps didn't have training or places to do all this. So the Army Air Corps and them decided they had to have a training facility so they called the FAA in and gave them a contract to teach civilian pilots to be trained to be on standby. That's how it got started. So that's why they called it the Civilian Pilot Training Program. But they were all under the understanding that they were going to be on standby in case a war broke out they would be called into service because they didn't have a regular Air Corps training, just the Air Corps. So that's how CPT program got started. Now the CPT program was actually not set up ready for blacks. But they had fought and said — this is where they made a mistake, they didn't say don't include blacks; they did it with the understanding it was going to be for whites and so forth. Until they started jumping; *(Capt. Platte claps)* we want to be in it. Then they had a hard problem coming out so, they gave them an opportunity to give them training so, they had six colleges to go through. But once they started training, they weren't supposed to go beyond the private's license, and they'll put them on standby. But Tuskegee in the meantime decided they were going to add additional training. To get a commercial and an instructor's rating in their college program. Well this is what they were doing. By the time the war broke out, they started calling and recruiting whites, but then they started saying you have a whole lot of pilots trained in this program, why don't you use them. And they didn't even start

training until July of '41. The war started back up there in December when Pearl Harbor. So it took a whole lot of time to get that started. So they said okay we'll just pick this school cause' they already had facilities and were doing pretty well and Maxwell AFB was training command there. And one of the biggest things that helped them to get it was: 1) I told you about the doctor that got me through there.

Okay. Another thing I didn't mention was that Auburn University was very near Tuskegee, they had a retired navel officer there who was in their aeronautical training program. Dr. Patterson got permission from him to come over to Tuskegee three times a week to teach us navigation and teach us weather and rules of flying and this type of thing. Now, he would come over three times a week to teach us. There were 17 males and 3 females in the class. Because of his instructions no one in the course failed the FAA examination to get a license. No one failed it. They made the highest score in the Eastern Training Command in the United States. They don't tell you about that. They made the highest score. That also was in there favor. Another thing they don't tell you is that Mrs. Roosevelt was on the Board of Trustees at Tuskegee. She flew with Chief Anderson. In the movie it shows she's flying with a cadet, but she flew with Chief Anderson before the program started. She's the one that went back and also spoke with President Roosevelt to encourage him to get this program started.

We had also...another thing that actually happened was that GL Washington, who I mentioned a few minutes ago, he was an MIT grad at Tuskegee and he got permission from Dr. Patterson to go to the Eastern Training Command, which was Maxwell AFB, in order to get people to be a part of this. He had gone to Coffey School, Bishop Coleman, and Willow Brown School and he found Turner — not Turner — he got Chief Anderson, he was there too, but he also got Mr. Parrish.

**Mrs. Platte:** I thought Parrish came from Auburn?

**Capt. Platte:** He was there too. They got him there. But he was over the whole base of training instructors.

**Mrs. Platte:** I thought Parrish came from Auburn University?

**Capt. Platte:** No. He came from Training Command as a retired navel officer. He was a regular Army person. He was a Colonel. So he was ROTC up there at the Coffey School in Chicago. So he took over the whole program. From him he brought — at the primary where I was he had a group of whites from the Army Air Corps to give us all our flight, to determine whether or not we were going to be promoted or stay with the program and go forward. They were there. When we went to basic, we didn't have any instructors to teach that. So all of them were white in basic and advanced. Those were white instructors. So Parrish was the one that also — when they tried to disband the program he would always stand up and he was fair and he would try to say well look they can still do it. All along, to be frankly honest with you, there were like Parrish — those white instructors over there in basic and advanced and the white that was over all instructors and cadets are the ones that determined who went through. And they are the ones that had something to do with us getting through. It wasn't because we were there and were all black. But all along the way there was support. Even Truman had something to do with it.

So its no such thing — if you look at it they say, oh the blacks did this and they were doing this and so forth. But remember they had somebody behind them. My attitude is this, I think that everyone is no better than I am and I am no better than they are. I feel that each one is responsible for what they do. It's not based on color. And I figure from that standpoint there is no such thing because I agree with it. One of the main reasons the program got off is if you look at cadets that came through most of them came in from the East coast. They didn't advertise cadets. Most of them had training. But the first class where most of these people came in the CPT program started off — all of them had prior training then they built on that experience that was already there. But it was a long time before they got people in because most of the time they didn't even advertise. And most of them found out because it was passed on by some colored person or either they actually ran in to someone that told them about it.

**Interviewer #1:** We are going to wrap up rather quickly, but you mentioned that there were six other colleges who were there?

**Capt. Platte:** Yes. There was Hampton, Howard University, Morris-Brown, Tuskegee. Ughh. I can't remember the others. Most of those programs...those are the ones that came to in to be, most of them became flight instructors became cadets.

**Interviewer #2:** Was there ever a point during the war or before where you had gotten discouraged when you didn't think this was the right path or did you ever doubt it.

**Capt. Platte:** No I didn't. I'm going to tell you how I felt about it. Most of them knew what the problem was, but you know how you when are small and you get a new toy or something you used to like, you ignore everything that goes on, all you are interested in is, ohhh this is something I like. This is what I feel caused it. It was the same with me. All this other stuff I didn't think about it. All I wanted to know is that I hadn't done it before so don't worry about that, just do what I can do here. And the more I tried because I was an engineer, I was developing and I was learning. So that's what I felt with the whole group. I don't think it was nothing special. It's the attitude and the confidence with what they wanted to do. That's why I say it depends with each individual. Everyone that felt, I'm not going to do it — they're not going to do it. But if you say, I'm going to do it, and you put forth the effort — you can. I think of that bicycle rider. I can't think of his name.

**Interviewer #2:** Lance Armstrong.

**Capt. Platte:** Yes. How he was. He was determined that he was going to do it. I think that is the same drive you have to have.

**Interviewer #2:** It was all about the flying though.

**Capt. Platte:** That's right it was all about the flying. All this other stuff that everybody else is putting in their version. Or they are going back to what happened in the past, which is part of the problem. But the point is that you ignore all that...you ain't worried

about all that. This is what's more important. Forget that now. If you start worrying about that you aren't going to accomplish what you want to do.

**Interviewer #2:** Did you ever get to meet Eleanor Roosevelt when she came and she toured? What was that experience like?

**Capt. Platte:** To me it was really shocking. See I had never seen anything like that...I was from the South. I got a chance to see Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Carver was living, I got to see President Roosevelt when he came down through there, I got to see Joe Lewis when he came down through there, Lena Horn came through there...all the ones came through there for some reason. Most of them came through there, even Henry Ford came through there; they all were coming there because of that relationship with Dr. Carver in comparison with other black colleges. They attracted a lot of attention.

**Interviewer #2:** You got to meet Dr. Carver? What are your memories of him?

**Capt. Platte:** He was living there. He would not associate with people...if you come up and want to see you, he would go off into his room. He would make a speech every so often. He's not the type of person that would want to come out and want to speak and say hello. He was always working in his little shop. And if you were the type of person that you would walk in there without the idea of recognizing him as Dr. Carver, you just wanted to say hi and all that he would probably stay there. But if you go ahead and say, "Oh Dr. Carver!" for some reason or another he would leave. That's the type of person he was.

**Interviewer #1:** You said he had a shop. What kind of shop did he have?

**Capt. Platte:** He had a research lab. A lot of projects that he had there. He was the one that actually brought Alabama back. Because what they did they had cotton they were growing and the soil would use up all the nutrients and he turned around and used some kind of bean and he put it back in there and made a big industry out of it. That's why it became popular.

**Interviewer #2:** You may have asked about this earlier (*looking at Interviewer #1*) but you were already in the program Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>, Pearl Harbor,

**Capt. Platte:** Yes.

**Interviewer #2:** So what are your memories of hearing that news and were you surprised by it?

**Capt. Platte:** I was surprised and I was a draftee really. Cause' I had to register for the draft board. And in fact they were actually wanted me to be in the first class (first African-American combat mission) and I didn't want to be in the first class because I was a flight instructor.

**Mrs. Platte:** Not the first class — when they picked the people to go overseas he chose to stay and teach.

**Interviewer #2:** You thought it was more important to teach other pilots coming up than going to combat. Was that a tough decision?

**Capt. Platte:** No. It wasn't a decision. I felt that I had an opportunity to be an instructor. But the same thing may happen to me, I might decide to be a cadet and I may not make it...so I better take what I got and enjoy that while I could. If I didn't make the flight instructor then I could always go back. You see what I'm saying...I could go into that.

**Interviewer #1:** Mr. Platte, when were you born?

**Capt. Platte:** Actually, the real date I was born was March 16, 1921. The records show that I was born 1918/1919.

**Mrs. Platte:** March 18, 1919. How they did that I will never know?

**Interviewer #1:** Do you know how the discrepancy came about?

**Capt. Platte:** No. I don't know.

**Interviewer #2:** They just got it wrong.

**Capt. Platte:** That's right. Well I know sometimes people automatically change things I find that they think they've got the right thing cause' I think they had my brother and so forth they always got us confused, so that's what I just think happened.

**Interviewer #1:** When we first started you talked about how when you were little you knew you wanted to fly.

**Capt. Platte:** That's right.

**Interviewer #1:** Wow. What an experience.

**Capt. Platte:** I think that...like I told you the reason I wanted to fly was because I wanted to see what was on the other side of the boundary outside of my area and around the world cause' what had happened was that when I was growing up we had a zoo there. I could only go to the zoo one time a year...June 19<sup>th</sup>. My biggest surprise is... I was standing up there looking at this monkey and this monkey was standing there staring at me. I said ain't this something. I was looking at him because he was unusual and he was looking at me because I was unusual. What crossed my mind was that he had been looking at white people all the time cause' black people don't go out there. He was like, "Where did he come from?" So I was up there saying, "Where did he come from?" We both looked astonished. I've got that picture. I remember that. And I remember also the only white persons that were around there were the ones that ran the trains and the Ferris

wheel, but no one else was there. In Dallas they had Big Tex and all that. The only time I could go was once a year to that. So I had a real good indoctrination into this thing of being segregated. And like I said once I had realized it wasn't because I was black but it was they were telling me they didn't want me and so forth, but if I wanted to do it I could do it. And by watching that's why I saw what I saw. I saw Jack Johnson. Way back there and I think about the mistakes he made. These were the people that really helped me cause' I looked at those who were successful the way I wanted to do it and those who were unsuccessful and what I didn't want to do. So I based my future on what I wanted to do rather than those that were my role models. That's why I come to say that everybody to me is no better than I am and I am no better than they are because I am learning from them and they are learning from me. I figure that where I got is because of the Buffalo Soldiers, the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry, the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Bessie Coleman because they all made progress in this aviation field and I just picked up and carried on. But somebody got them started. So I figure when they say I did this and that — I even look at Tiger Woods. I told a group this morning, the way I look at Tiger Woods is I said if I wanted to be a golfer I could have been a Tiger Woods, but I didn't want to be no golfer. So I'm not a Tiger Woods. I said Tiger Woods at the same time he had to play somebody and when he was playing someone he was learning from them and they were learning from Tiger Woods so finally it got to the point they could beat Tiger Woods. So you could see that people are learning from what you do. You could be better. You might get there first, but it all gee wiz they are going to copy you and improve on their own. Well I figure it's going to always come from someone before me. Buffalo Soldiers. I look way back there to when Crispus Attucks was killed...the first black. He started it. Someone had to do it. I look back and he was the one. Cause' up until then no had done it. So there's always been a first and once somebody says oh I can do that. So naturally it got to the point we are now.

**Interviewer #1:** You know, I know you actually achieved your dream and you talked about the people that you looked up to and the people that were pioneers for you. But you were a pioneer for a lot of people also.

**Capt. Platte:** Oh yeah?

**Interviewer #1:** How do you feel about the contribution you made?

**Capt. Platte:** I feel that...I'm really in shock really. I feel like they say I'm doing. They gave me more credit for what I'm doing than I give myself. Cause' I feel what I'm doing really is developing what I've done over you and the past. Which made it possible. So I say gee wiz...it's nothing that I jumped up and said oh I did this here...it's just I fell in the right place at the right time. But I just think you can set an example, but what you should realize is that it doesn't make you number one because if you want some little boys or girls to see that they can use me as an example to come up. But remember they can still do the same thing I am doing. They don't necessarily say...“Oh I wish I could and this type of thing,” it all depends on the person. My brother taught me a good lesson. He taught me about health ...and he's dead. But he was an alcoholic and everything like that. So I didn't want to mistreat my body. And he could fly airplanes too, but he didn't do as well as I did because he let his health get him down. So my point is...that's why I

said there are two things that are very important: first of all, I see my friends out there and I tried to drink once upon a time, but the reason I didn't drink was my father had cigarettes around and I took a swab and that thing burned and choked me and I said, "Ahhhh no I ain't gonna punish myself no more." I tried to smoke and I didn't know how to inhale and coughed and I said, "It's not going to help me so forget it." My friends said "Oh Platte...smoke." But I wouldn't do it so I wouldn't become addicted to it. So that why I was saying, so I felt that normally when I thought I couldn't pass the test...I had passed the test. But I was always prepared that thinking that I wanted to make sure that I could pass it and do what I wanted to do. I realized you just can't do it if you are sick.  
*(Cell phone rings.)*

**Interviewer #1:** I think that is our queue to stop. I wish we had more time. Thank you so much Mr. Platte.