

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Petersen, Frank E.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr.,
Dates:	February 7, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:27:30).
Abstract:	Lieutenant general (retired) Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr. (1932 - 2015) was the first African American general in the history of the United States Marine Corps. Petersen was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 7, 2007, in Stevensville, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_052
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Marine Corps Lieutenant General Frank Emmanuel Petersen, Jr. was born on March 2, 1932 in Topeka, Kansas. His spelling of Petersen is popular amongst his paternal relatives in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands. A maternal ancestor, Archie McKinney served in the 55th Regiment of Massachusetts Infantry during the Civil War. His parents, Frank E. Petersen, Sr., a radio repairman, and Edythe Southard Petersen, met at the University of Kansas. Petersen grew up in South Topeka and attended Monroe Elementary School, the gifted program of Boswell Junior High School, where his classmate was the former University of North Carolina head basketball coach Dean Smith. He graduated from Topeka High School in 1949.

Briefly attending Washburn College, Petersen joined the United States Navy in 1950. He entered the Naval Aviation Cadet Program in 1951 and in 1952 after finishing flight training as the first black Marine aviator, was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps (USMC). Petersen later received his B.A. degree in 1967 and his M.A. degree in international affairs in 1973, both at George Washington University. He also graduated from the National War College in 1973.

Assigned briefly to El Toro, California, Petersen was assigned to Korea in 1953. There, he flew Chance Vaught F4U Corsairs on 64 combat missions with Marine Fighter Squadron 212 out of the K-6 Airfield in Pyong-Taek to the Yalu River. He earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and six air medals. In the 1960s, Petersen experienced the transition from propeller driven fighters to jets like the Lockheed T-33B Seastar, the Gruman F9F Cougar and the Douglas F3D Skynight. In 1968, Petersen became the first African American to command a squadron when he took over Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314 (VMFA-314), the Black Knights, in Vietnam. VFMA-314 received the 1968 Hanson Award for best squadron in the USMC. Shot down but rescued in the DMZ, Petersen added 250 combat missions to his Korean total. He eventually commanded a Marine Aircraft Group and a Marine Aircraft Wing. In 1975, Petersen took command of Marine Air Corps 32 at Cherry Point, North Carolina and in 1979 became the first African American General in USMC history. Petersen was made Lieutenant General in 1986 and was appointed Commanding General of the USMC Combat Development Command at Quantico, Virginia. When he retired in 1988, Petersen was the first black three star general in the USMC and the “Silver Hawk” and “Gray Eagle” senior and ranking aviator in both the USMC and the Navy. He was awarded still another Distinguished Service Medal for his command services at Quantico.

Petersen spent his civilian years as vice president of corporate aviation for DuPont DeNemours, Inc. Managing their corporate fleet, he traveled the globe, retiring in 1997.

Petersen was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 7, 2007.

Petersen passed away on August 25, 2015. He is survived by five children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 7, 2007, in Stevensville, Maryland, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Lieutenant general (retired) Lt. Gen. Frank E.

Petersen, Jr. (1932 - 2015) was the first African American general in the history of the United States Marine Corps.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Petersen, Frank E.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Petersen, Frank E.--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Marine Corps.

Occupations:

Lieutenant General (Retired)

HistoryMakers® Category:

MilitaryMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr., February 7, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr.,
Section A2007_052_001_001, TRT: 0:29:56 2007/02/07

Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr. was born on March 2, 1932 in Topeka, Kansas to Edythe Southard Petersen and Frank E. Petersen, Sr. His maternal great-grandfather, Archie McKinney, fought for the 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment in the Civil War. Petersen's maternal family later settled in Wichita, Kansas, and then Syracuse, Kansas, where they had a farm. His father was raised in St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where he worked as a tour guide until a visiting journalist from Topeka arranged for him to move there. Petersen's parents met in Lawrence, Kansas, where his mother was a student at the University of Kansas. Petersen grew up in an all-black neighborhood in South Topeka, where he enjoyed building model airplanes and listening to Joe Louis' boxing matches on the radio. Petersen's family read the Kansas City Call, Pittsburgh Courier, Negro Digest and Our World magazine. He attended Monroe Elementary School, and then Boswell Junior High School, where he was in a program for gifted students.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr.,

Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr. attended Boswell Junior High School in Topeka, Kansas, where his peers included U.S. Senator Nancy Kassebaum and basketball coach Dean Smith. At Topeka High School, he studied in integrated classrooms, but played for the all-black Topeka Ramblers basketball team. Upon graduating in 1949, Petersen enrolled at Washburn Municipal University of Topeka, but left after a year to join the U.S. Navy. He excelled on the entrance exam, and entered the naval electronics school. When Petersen learned about Jesse L. Brown, the first black Navy pilot, who was killed in action in the Korean War, he transferred to the U.S. Marine Corps flight school. He trained alongside fellow African American candidate Dave Campbell, and qualified as the first black Marine pilot in 1952. Petersen joined a fighter squadron at Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, and was deployed to the Korean War in 1953. He flew a propeller-driven fighter, which was outmatched by the enemy Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-15 jet fighter.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr.,
Section A2007_052_001_003, TRT: 0:30:26 2007/02/07

Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr. flew sixty-four missions as a fighter pilot in the Korean War during 1953. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, and profiled in Jet magazine as the first black U.S. Marine Corps pilot. He returned to the United States in 1954, the year that his childhood friend, Linda Brown Thompson, was the plaintiff in the decision of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. Petersen was stationed in California at Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, where he learned to fly jet airplanes on the Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star. While there, he dated Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, who later became a politician; but, in 1955, married Eleanor Burton Anderson, a friend from Topeka, Kansas. In 1968, during the Vietnam War, Petersen returned to combat as a lieutenant colonel, and was the first black pilot to command a Marine fighter squadron. Once, while flying over the demilitarized zone, Petersen's airplane was hit by enemy fire. He ejected from the aircraft, and was rescued by a Marine helicopter.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr.,
Section A2007_052_001_004, TRT: 0:28:09 2007/02/07

Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr. received the Legion of Merit for his service in the Vietnam War, and the Purple Heart for injuries he sustained ejecting from his fighter plane over Vietnam's demilitarized zone. Due to the ongoing Civil Rights Movement and controversy over the draft, there were often tensions between black and white soldiers in the U.S. military in the Vietnam War, most notably aboard the USS Kitty Hawk CV-63 aircraft carrier. Petersen's tour in Vietnam ended in 1969, and he was assigned to conduct international fact-finding missions for the armed forces to investigate the cause of racial tension. He recalls meeting the soldiers who planned to assassinate U.S. Army general James H. Polk, and befriending Curtis R. Smothers, a Judge Advocate General's Corps attorney who defended black soldiers at court martials. In 1977, Petersen was promoted to become the first black general in the U.S. Marine Corps, and rose to the rank of three-star general by 1986. He retired from the military in 1988.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr.,
Section A2007_052_001_005, TRT: 0:29:47 2007/02/07

Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen, Jr. retired from the U.S. Marine Corps in 1988 after thirty-eight years of service, and became a vice president at E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company under Edgar S. Woolard, Jr. His duties included managing the corporate aircraft fleet and supervising international real estate holdings. Petersen retired from the company in 1997, and published his autobiography, 'Into the Tiger's Jaw,' in 1998. He served as a board member and chairman emeritus of the National Marrow Donor Program, and recruited for the U.S. Marine Corps at historically black colleges. Petersen explains his opposition to the Iraq War, and his criticism of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. He talks about his friendships with African American military leaders like Colin L. Powell, Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr. and Samuel Lee Gravely, Jr. Petersen describes his family, and his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He also reflects upon his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered.

