

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Alexander Jefferson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Jefferson, Alexander, 1921-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson,
Dates:	June 11, 2010 and June 29, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007 and 2010
Physical Description:	13 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:57:43).
Abstract:	Education administrator Alexander Jefferson (1921 - 2022) trained for World War II at Tuskegee Army Air Field and flew eighteen missions during the war. He was shot down and captured on August 12, 1944 and spent eight months in the POW camp at Stalag Luft III. In 1947 Jefferson returned to civilian life and worked as an education and administrator in the Detroit Public Schools for over thirty years. Jefferson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 11, 2010 and June 29, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_192
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Alexander Jefferson was born on November 15, 1921, in Detroit Michigan, the first child of Alexander Jefferson and Jane White Jefferson. His great-grandfather William Jefferson White was born to a slave woman and a white slave owner in the 1830s. Jefferson's grandfather became a minister, and in 1867, opened an all black school for boys in Augusta, Georgia, which trained its students exclusively for the ministry and pedagogy. Jefferson's grandfather moved the school to Atlanta, Georgia, where the name changed from Atlanta Baptist Seminary to Atlanta Baptist College. Today, it is known as Morehouse College.

Jefferson grew up in a Polish neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan, and attended Craft Elementary School, Condon Intermediate School, and Chadsey High School. While in school, Jefferson spent most of his time in the biology and chemistry laboratories, at home reading from his mother's extensive library, and building model airplanes. He graduated from Chadsey High School in 1938 as the only African-American to take college preparatory classes. Jefferson received his B.A. degree in 1942 from Clark College in Atlanta. On September 23, 1942, he was sworn into the United States Army Reserves. He volunteered for flight training but was not accepted immediately. In the mean time, Jefferson went to work as an analytical chemist for three months before entering graduate school at Howard University.

In April 1943, Jefferson received orders to report to Tuskegee Army Air Field to begin flight training. He graduated as a second lieutenant in January 1944 and was classified as a replacement pilot for the 332nd Fighter Group. Jefferson continued his training at Selfridge Army Air Field Base, where he was under the instruction of First Lieutenants Charles Dryden and Stan Watson, who had flown in combat in 1943 in North Africa with the all-Black 99th Fighter Squadron. In June 1944, Jefferson's orders sent him to Ramitelli Air Base in Italy, where Colonel Benjamin O. Davis was the 332nd Fighter Group Commander. Jefferson flew eighteen missions before

being shot down and captured on August 12, 1944. He spent eight months in the POW camp at Stalag Luft III., and was eventually freed on April 29, 1945.

Jefferson returned to civilian life in 1947, received his teaching certificate from Wayne State University, and began teaching elementary school science for the Detroit Public School System. Jefferson received his M.A. degree in education in 1954. He was appointed assistant principal in 1969 and served the Michigan School System for over 30 years. In 1995, Jefferson was enshrined in the Michigan Aviation Hall of Fame. In 2001, he was awarded the Purple Heart, and in 2007, he received the Congressional Gold Medal. Jefferson was one of the founders of the Detroit and National chapters of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Jefferson passed away on June 22, 2022 at the age of 100.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Alexander Jefferson was conducted by Denise Gines and Larry Crowe on June 11, 2010 and June 29, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 13 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Education administrator Alexander Jefferson (1921 - 2022) trained for World War II at Tuskegee Army Air Field and flew eighteen missions during the war. He was shot down and captured on August 12, 1944 and spent eight months in the POW camp at Stalag Luft III. In 1947 Jefferson returned to civilian life and worked as an education and administrator in the Detroit Public Schools for over thirty years.

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:

Jefferson, Alexander, 1921-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Jefferson, Alexander, 1921---Interviews

African American veterans--Interviews

African American educators--Michigan--Detroit--Interviews

African American school administrators--Michigan--Detroit--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Tuskegee Airman

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 Alexander Jefferson, June 11, 2010 and June 29, 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 5/30/2023 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 Alexander Jefferson, Section A2007_192_002_010, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

Alexander Jefferson enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps upon graduating from Clark College in 1942. While waiting to begin his flight training, he took chemistry courses at Howard University. In April of 1943, Jefferson reported to the Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama, where he graduated as a pilot and second lieutenant in January of 1944. The next month, he was stationed at the Selfridge Army Air Base in Michigan, where Lieutenant Colonel Charles Dryden trained him to fly the Bell P-39 Airacobra fighter plane. Jefferson and the other black officers petitioned Colonel Robert Selway for entrance to the officers' club, but were refused. They completed their training at the Walterboro Army Airfield in South Carolina, and then deployed to Ramitelli Air Base in Italy. Jefferson remembers influential Tuskegee Airmen like General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., Lee A. Archer and Joseph Gomer; as well as the accidental death of his friend, Othell Dickson, during his first flight in a North American Aviation P-51 Mustang.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section A2007_192_002_011, TRT: 0:30:22 ?

Alexander Jefferson's aircraft was shot down over France during World War II, while he was completing his nineteenth mission with the 301st Fighter Squadron. He and his copilot, Robert T. Daniels, were captured by German soldiers, one of whom was a University of Michigan alumnus. Jefferson was imprisoned at Stalag Luft III, a war prison camp in Sagan, Germany; and later at Stalag VII-A. He was respected by the white prisoners, who regarded the Tuskegee Airmen as excellent fighter pilots. Jefferson was freed in April of 1945 by General George S. Patton, Jr. and the U.S. Third Army, and afterwards witnessed the mass graves at the Dachau concentration camp. He visited Le Havre, France before returning home via the New York Harbor. Jefferson reflects upon the Freeman Field Mutiny, and the U.S. military's reticence to use black pilots in combat during World War II. He served as an instrument instructor at the Tuskegee Army Airfield and Lockbourne Army Airfield until being discharged from the U.S. military in 1946.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Alexander Jefferson was born on November 15, 1921 in Detroit, Michigan to Jane White Jefferson and Alexander Jefferson. His maternal great-grandfather,

William Jefferson White, founded Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia; and married Jefferson's maternal great-grandmother, who had Cherokee ancestry. His maternal grandfather, Henry White, attended Gammon Theological Seminary; and his maternal grandmother, Emma Nelson White, graduated from Atlanta University. His mother was born in Atlanta in 1891, and became a schoolteacher in Newnan, Georgia. Jefferson's paternal grandparents, Fortune Jefferson and Susan Boone, were farmers in Lynchburg, South Carolina. His father moved to Atlanta as a teenager, and went on to work for the Detroit Lubricator Company. In Detroit, Jefferson was raised in a Polish neighborhood, where many of his friends were second generation immigrants. Jefferson aspired to become a pilot from an early age; but, due to racial discrimination, did not expect to achieve his goal.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_002, TRT: 0:27:40 ?

Alexander Jefferson often built model airplanes while growing up in Detroit, Michigan. He attended the Scott Memorial United Methodist Church, where his parents, Jane White Jefferson and Alexander Jefferson, were active members; and began his education at Detroit's John S. Newberry School. After the school was demolished, he attended Craft Elementary School, where his sixth grade teacher, Miss Simpson, helped him develop strong public speaking skills. He went on to attend Condon Junior High School, until his teachers enrolled him in a trade program. In response, his mother secured his transfer to Munger Junior High School, where he took college preparatory courses. In 1938, Jefferson graduated from Charles H. Chadsey High School at sixteen years old. He drove his Ford Model A to Atlanta, Georgia, where he lived with his maternal grandfather, Methodist minister Henry White, and studied chemistry at Clark University under Professor E. Luther Brooks. Jefferson graduated in 1942.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_003, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Alexander Jefferson enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and began his flight training at Tuskegee Army Airfield in Tuskegee, Alabama. With his class of 125 trainees, he learned to fly on the Vultee BT-13 Valiant trainer aircraft. While many recruits left the pilot program for reasons such as lack of coordination and poor attitude, Jefferson was among the twenty-five students to graduate as second lieutenants in 1944. Some of his classmates went on to become bombardiers, while Jefferson trained as an escort fighter pilot on the North American Aviation T-6 Texan under his first black flight instructor, Perry Young, Jr. Jefferson transferred to the Selfridge Army Air Base in Michigan, where he was prepared for deployment overseas by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Dryden and Spann Watson of the 99th Fighter Squadron. On the weekends, Jefferson and his fellow pilots visited nightclubs like the Club Three Sixes in Detroit, Michigan, which was a short drive from the air base.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_003E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_004, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Alexander Jefferson was stationed at the Selfridge Army Air Base in Michigan during World War II. He and his fellow Tuskegee Airmen petitioned for entrance to the officers' club on base, but were denied by General Frank O'Driscoll Hunter. Jefferson's squadron was transferred to the Walterboro Army Airfield in South Carolina, where his instructor, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Dryden, was court martialed for flying too close to the base during a test flight. Then, Jefferson was deployed with the 332nd Fighter Group to the Ramitelli Air

Base in Italy, where he flew escort missions on a North American Aviation P-51 Mustang. Under the leadership of General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., Jefferson and pilots Joseph D. Elsberry and William Faulkner were part of a sixteen-plane squadron that escorted bombers to targets in Italy and Germany. Jefferson flew nineteen combat missions with the 332nd Fighter Group, before being shot down over France. He also reflects upon the history of racial discrimination in the U.S. military.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_004E, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_005, TRT:
0:29:20 ?

Alexander Jefferson's aircraft was shot down over Toulon, France in 1944, during his nineteenth mission with the 332nd Fighter Group. He and his copilot, Robert T. Daniels, were captured by German soldiers, whose commanding officer, a graduate of the University of Michigan, talked to Jefferson about Detroit's Club Three Sixes. During transport to a war prison camp, Jefferson was reunited with Richard D. Macon, another airman who had been shot down; and, while stopped at a station, their train was swarmed by protesting Hitler Youth members. In Frankfurt am Main, Germany, Jefferson was interrogated by a German officer, who showed him copies of his academic records and photographs of him at the Tuskegee Army Airfield. He was imprisoned at Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Germany, where he roomed with three American soldiers who were organizing escape efforts. As an officer, he was treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention, but had to rely on Red Cross food parcels to supplement the Germans' meager rations.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_006, TRT:
0:29:10 ?

Alexander Jefferson was imprisoned during World War II at Stalag Luft III, a war prison camp in Germany, where the film 'The Great Escape' was set. As an officer, Jefferson was exempt from work duty, and spent his time walking, drawing and knitting. Along with the other black officers at Stalag Luft III, including Wilbur Long, Alfred Q. Carroll, Jr. and Lloyd "Scotty" Hathcock, Jefferson was respected by both the German and white American troops, many of whom remarked upon the Tuskegee Airmen's outstanding record. When Soviet forces neared the camp, Jefferson and the other prisoners marched in frigid temperatures to Stalag VII-A in Moosburg, Germany. They tracked the approach of American troops using smuggled radios, and were prepared when General George S. Patton, Jr.'s U.S. Army command liberated Stalag VII-A in April of 1945. After Jefferson was released from the camp, he visited the recently discovered Dachau concentration camp, and witnessed its mass graves.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_007, TRT:
0:29:30 ?

Alexander Jefferson spent two weeks in Paris, France after being liberated from the Stalag VII-A war prison camp in 1945. He then sailed to the New York Harbor, where the returning soldiers were immediately segregated by race. After a brief leave, Jefferson was stationed as an instrument instructor at the Tuskegee Army Airfield. There, he met parachute rigger Adella Tucker Jefferson, whom he married in 1946. Upon delisting from the U.S. Army Air Corps, they moved to Detroit, Michigan, where Jefferson studied education at Wayne University. Jefferson remained in the U.S. Army Reserve; and, in 1948, began teaching science at the all-black D. Bethune Duffield Elementary School. After six years, he joined the faculty of Detroit's integrated Pattengill Elementary School. He was appointed assistant principal of P.J.M. Halley Elementary School in 1970,

and transferred to Dexter Ferry Elementary School the following year. Jefferson was also a member of Detroit's NAACP chapter, and once attended a speech by Malcolm X.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_008, TRT: 0:24:30 ?

Alexander Jefferson earned a master's degree in education from Wayne University in Detroit, Michigan in 1954. He taught for several decades in Detroit's public schools, retiring as the assistant principal of Dexter Ferry Elementary School in 1980. Jefferson was a longtime member of the Detroit chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., along with Robert Walker, Wardell A. Polk and William H. Holloman. He was active in his chapter's campaign to establish the Tuskegee Airmen National Historical Museum in Detroit's Historic Fort Wayne district, which was supported by Detroit Mayor Coleman Young. Jefferson talks about his friendships with Young, who was a pilot and participant in the Freeman Field Mutiny before entering politics; and with General Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr., a Tuskegee Airman who became a four star general in the U.S. Air Force. In 2006, Jefferson attended the Tuskegee Airmen's Congressional Gold Medal ceremony. He reflects upon his legacy, and that of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Video Oral History Interview with Alexander Jefferson, Section B2007_192_001_009, TRT: 0:10:30 ?

Alexander Jefferson narrates his photographs.