

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lanier W. Phillips

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Phillips, Lanier, 1923-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lanier W. Phillips,
Dates:	July 29, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:57:15).
Abstract:	Sonar technician Lanier W. Phillips (1923 - 2012) was with the U.S. Navy in World War II, where he became the first African American sonar technician. In his civilian career, Phillips worked on the development of ALVIN deep water submersible, and deep sea lamp technologies. Phillips was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 29, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_219
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Sonar technician Lanier Phillips was born on March 14, 1923, in Lithonia, Georgia, to sharecroppers. Phillips attended the Yellow River School, the only colored school in DeKalb County, until it was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan in 1929. As a remedy, Phillips was sent to live with relatives in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1932; there he attended Main Street Elementary School and Howard High School in Chattanooga until he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1941, at the age of eighteen, in order to escape the rigors of sharecropping in the South.

In the Navy, Phillips faced strict segregation. After boot camp, aboard the U.S.S. Truxton, Phillips began working in the mess hall alongside other sailors of color. In February 1942, the U.S.S. Truxton, the Pollux, and the Wilkes capsized off the coast of Newfoundland; 110 sailors were killed aboard the Truxton alone. Phillips was the sole African American survivor, finding refuge aboard the last raft. A group of Canadian townspeople rescued Phillips and 185 white sailors. Phillips would go on serve in battle with the U.S. Navy several times throughout the course of World War II.

In the 1950s, Phillips applied to the U.S. Navy's Fleet Sonar School; he received a letter of recommendation to this post from Congressman Charles Diggs of Michigan. In 1957, Phillips became the U.S. Navy's first black sonar technician. Phillips retired from the U.S. Navy in 1961, and began work as a civil technician with EG & G, a systems engineering firm; at this time he also began work with the ALVIN deep water submersible team. Phillips later joined the deep sea exploration team of Jacques Cousteau and assisted in the development of deep sea lamp technology.

During the 1960s, Phillips marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma, Alabama. In 1977, after his wife's death, Phillips sought relief from the growing racial tensions of northern cities, so he moved his family to his hometown of Lithonia, Georgia.

Lanier Phillips passed away on May 20, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lanier W. Phillips was conducted by Cheryl Butler on July 29, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Sonar technician Lanier W. Phillips (1923 - 2012) was with the U.S. Navy in World War II, where he became the first African American sonar technician. In his civilian career, Phillips worked on the development of ALVIN deep water submersible, and deep sea lamp technologies.

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:

Phillips, Lanier, 1923-2012

Butler, Cheryl (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Phillips, Lanier, 1923-2012 --Interviews

Industrial designers--Interviews

Navies--Officers--United States--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Navy

Occupations:

Sonar Technician

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 Lanier W. Phillips, July 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 Lanier W. Phillips, Section A2007_219_001_001, TRT: 0:28:47
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Lanier W. Phillips was born on March 14, 1923 in Lithonia, Georgia to Celvia Woodall Phillips and Harvie Phillips. His maternal grandparents were Ed Woodall, the white owner of a quarry in Lithonia, and Flossie Woodall, who had black and Native American ancestry. Together, they built a school on Bruce Street for Lithonia's black children. Phillips' mother was born in 1905, and had nine siblings, some of whom passed as white in adulthood. His paternal grandparents, Adeline Phillips and Eli Phillips, were born into slavery; and, after emancipation, remained in Lithonia, while the rest of Phillips' paternal family moved north. Phillips was raised in Lithonia in the early 20th century, when the area was controlled by the Ku Klux Klan. He describes his experiences of racial violence, including the lynching of Charles Mitchell, who had fought with the white bank owner I.M. Starr; and, in 1935, the burning of the all-black Yellow River School, where Phillips began his education.

Industrial designers--Interviews

Navies--Officers--United States--Interviews

Video Oral History Interview with Lanier W. Phillips, Section A2007_219_001_002, TRT: 0:28:55
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Lanier W. Phillips began his education at the Yellow River School in Snellville, Georgia. The school was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan in 1935; and, several years later, Phillips moved to his maternal aunt's home in Chattanooga, Tennessee to attend the West Main Street School. He made frequent visits to his family in Lithonia, Georgia, where he accompanied them to Reverend N.T. Walker's services at the Union Missionary Baptist Church. Phillips went on to attend Chattanooga's East Fifth Street Junior High School, where he had difficult learning Latin, while working as a custodian and paperboy. Phillips graduated from the manual training program at Howard High School in 1941. He worked for a time at the Milner Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, and then enlisted in the U.S. Navy in the fall of 1941. After completing basic training in Norfolk, Virginia, Phillips was assigned to serve as a mess attendant on the U.S.S. Truxtun. His first voyage was to Iceland, where he was not allowed to leave the ship due to his race.

Video Oral History Interview with Lanier W. Phillips, Section A2007_219_001_003, TRT: 0:29:59
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Lanier W. Phillips completed basic training for the U.S. Navy in Norfolk, Virginia, and became a junior mess attendant on the U.S.S. Truxtun. On February 18, 1942, the ship ran aground off the coast of Canada. His fellow black mess attendants, Henry Langston, Earl Houston and Billy Gene Turner, all died in the wreck. Phillips boarded a raft with his white crewmates, Edward Bergeron and Harry Egner, and the survivors were rescued by the citizens of St. Lawrence, Canada. Phillips was nursed to health by a white woman, which initially frightened him, as he was accustomed to the segregated South. When the U.S. Navy arrived to transport the survivors, Phillips was separated from the white crew, and returned on the U.S.S. Prairie. After thirty days' leave, he was stationed on the U.S.S. New York. During World War II, Phillips took part in the invasion of North Africa, where he met entertainer Josephine Baker. Later, he was transferred to the Pacific Theater, and fought the Japanese forces on Bougainville Island.

Video Oral History Interview with Lanier W. Phillips, Section A2007_219_001_004, TRT: 0:29:57

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Lanier W. Phillips served on the U.S.S. Half Moon during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944. When World War II ended in 1945, Phillips reported to Florida's Naval Air Station Jacksonville, where he was accosted by police for entering a cafe intended for white war prisoners. When the U.S. military was nominally integrated in 1948, Phillips was stationed in Corpus Christi, Texas; but, after protesting to integrate the base's mess hall, was reassigned to the Naval Air Station Miami. There, he served under an openly racist officer, and was threatened by the white sailors after boxer Joe Louis defeated Billy Conn. During the Korean War, Phillips was stationed on the U.S.S. Forrest B. Royal, and participated in the Hungnam evacuation. In 1952, he was accepted to Fleet Sonar School in Key West, Florida with the support of Congressman Charles Diggs, Jr. Phillips also reflects upon his recognition in documentaries about the U.S.S. Truxtun shipwreck disaster.

Video Oral History Interview with Lanier W. Phillips, Section A2007_219_001_005, TRT: 0:28:23

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Lanier W. Phillips was the first African American to complete the U.S. Navy's Fleet Sonar School in Key West, Florida. He was assigned as a sonar technician aboard the U.S.S. Gearing, where his commanding officers immediately demanded an inspection to assess his fitness for the job, which he passed with high marks. Later, he trained as a sonar instructor, and taught in Suitland, Maryland, and then aboard the U.S.S. Yosemite. Phillips left the U.S. Navy in 1961, and became an oceanography technician at the firm of Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier, Inc., which was led by MIT professor Harold Eugene Edgerton. In this role, Phillips designed technical equipment for clients like deep sea explorers Jacques Cousteau and Robert D. Ballard. In the 1960s, Phillips moved with his wife, Virginia Phillips, to Boston, Massachusetts. He participated in the Selma to Montgomery march of 1965, where he met civil rights leaders like Hosea Williams, Reverend Dr. C.T. Vivian and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth.

Video Oral History Interview with Lanier W. Phillips, Section A2007_219_001_006, TRT: 0:31:14

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Lanier W. Phillips first met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1950s, when Dr. King was a guest of Reverend Michael Haynes at the Twelfth Baptist Church in Boston, Massachusetts; and, in 1965, he took part in Dr. King's Selma to Montgomery march. Phillips raised five children in Boston, where he witnessed the riots after Dr. King's assassination in 1968, and the Louise Day Hicks' campaign against school integration. After his wife, Virginia Phillips, died in 1970, Phillips moved with his children to Lithonia, Georgia. There, he served as a volunteer housing engineer, and advocated for sewer construction in the black community. He also gave motivational speeches at Lithonia's schools and the Union Missionary Baptist Church, and partnered with fellow U.S. Navy veteran Melvin G. Williams, Sr. to raise awareness of black naval heroes. Phillips reflects upon his life, his hopes and concerns for the African American community and his message to future generations. He also narrates his photographs.