

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Harris, Marcelite, 1943-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris,
Dates:	March 21, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:55:09).
Abstract:	Major general Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris (1943 - 2018) is the first African American woman ever to be named General in the United States Air Force and the first African American woman ever to become a Major General in the Department of Defense. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 21, 2012, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_074
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Major General Marcelite J. Harris was born in Houston, Texas on January 16, 1943 to Cecil O'Neal Jordan and Marcelite Terrell Jordan, Sr. Harris graduated from Kashmere Gardens High School before attending Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia in 1960. After graduating from Spelman with her B.A. degree in speech and drama in 1964, Harris enrolled at Lackland Air Force Base for military training and then joined the Women in the Air Force (WAF) program. She also earned her B.S. degree in business management from the University of Maryland.

Harris enrolled in an Aircraft Maintenance Officer Course at Chanute Air Force Base, Illinois in 1970. One year later, Harris was named a maintenance supervisor for the 49th Tactical Fighter Squadron at the Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand. She successively held the positions of job control officer and field maintenance supervisor at the 916th Air Refueling Squadron at Travis Air Force Base in California. In 1975, Harris was named personnel staff officer and White House social aide under the Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter presidential administrations before becoming an air officer commanding for the Cadet Squadron 39 at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Harris then served as the maintenance control officer for the 384th Air Refueling Wing at McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. She was the first woman to hold the post of commander of the 384th Avionics Maintenance Squadron at the McConnell Air Force Base in 1981 before assuming the role of commander for the 384th Field Maintenance Squadron. In 1982, Harris was named the director of maintenance at the Pacific Air Forces Logistic Support Center at Kadena Air Base in Japan. Four years later, she became deputy commander for maintenance at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi. Harris was the first woman to hold the positions in those just listed.

In 1990, Harris took the position of vice commander for the Oklahoma City Air Logistics Center at Tinker Air Force Base and later became the director of technical training at the Air Education and Training Command Headquarters at Randolph Air Force Base in Texas. In 1994, Harris was named director of maintenance at the U.S. Air Force Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Before retiring from the Air Force, Harris helped to establish a

permanent office for the Committee on Women in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), within its military committee.

Harris's tenure with the Air Force saw her rise from the rank of Second Lieutenant in 1965 to Major General thirty years later, becoming the first ever African American Female General. Harris joined the United States Alliance as Director of Operations Support and Logistics Processes in 1999. She also served a brief time as the chief of staff for New York Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein. In 2010, Harris was appointed by President Barack Obama to serve as a member of the Board of Visitors for the United States Air Force Academy. She has been featured in *Ebony* and was the recipient of the *Trailblazer Award* by the *Black Girls Rock Foundation*. Harris is listed in many Who's Who publications.

Maj. Gen. Marcelite J. Harris was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 21, 2012.

Harris passed away on September 7, 2018.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 21, 2012, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Major general Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris (1943 - 2018) is the first African American woman ever to be named General in the United States Air Force and the first African American woman ever to become a Major General in the Department of Defense.

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:

Harris, Marcelite, 1943-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Harris, Marcelite, 1943- --Interviews

African American generals--Interviews.

United States--Armed Forces--African American Generals--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Air Force

Occupations:

Major General

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 Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, March 21, 2012. 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 Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, Section A2012_074_001_001, TRT: 1:29:26 ?

Marcelite Harris describes her family's background. Harris' mother, Marcelite Elizabeth Terrell Jordan, was born in January, 1917 in Prairie View, Texas. She was raised in Houston, Texas, where she graduated from Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston. She then attended Huston-Tillotson University and American University, where she earned her degree in library science, before pursuing a career as a librarian. Harris' father, Cecil O'neal Jordan, was born in November, 1915, in Weches, Texas, and was also raised in Houston, where he met her mother while attending school. He went on to attend Prairie View A&M University. Harris talks about her siblings, her likeness to her father in personality, her earliest childhood memory, and her family's life in Houston, where they attended Pilgrim Congregational Church. She also talks about her maternal great-great grandfather, Alexander Terrell, who was born a slave, and upon his freedom, built a successful business as a blacksmith.

African American families--Texas.

African American mothers.

African American fathers.

African American grandparents.

Childhood--Texas--Houston.

African American churches--Texas--Houston.

Video Oral History Interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, Section A2012_074_001_002, TRT: 2:29:15 ?

Marcelite Harris was raised in Houston, Texas where she attended Gregory Elementary School, E.O. Smith Junior High School and Kashmere Gardens High School. She talks about her childhood and growing up in Houston. Harris also describes her experience in school, where her favorite subject was math. Her interests included art, drama, swimming, the Girl Scouts and cheerleading. Harris' family lived in the Fifth Ward and later in the Third Ward during the era of segregation. She also talks about her family's first television set, her favorite English teacher Callie Pride Hill, her first boyfriends, and going to the senior prom. Harris graduated from high school in 1960.

Education, Primary--Texas--Houston.

Education, Secondary--Texas--Houston.

Segregation in education--Texas--Houston.

Childhood--Texas--Houston.

African American families--Texas--Houston.

Video Oral History Interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, Section A2012_074_001_003, TRT: 3:28:28 ?

In 1960, Marcelite Harris graduated as salutatorian from Kashmere Gardens High School in Houston, Texas. She then enrolled in Spelman College and majored in mathematics, before switching to psychology and later, drama. Harris describes her experience at Spelman where she joined the theatre group, and toured the USO clubs in Germany and France. Harris discusses President John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Civil Right Movement, her involvement in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). After graduating from Spelman College in 1963, Harris tried to find a job in theatre, but instead started law school at Texas Southern University. She then became a teacher with the Head Start Program, before deciding to join the U.S. Air Force in 1965.

Education, Secondary--Texas--Houston.

Spelman College.

Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963--Assassination.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.).

Texas Southern University.

United States. Air Force.

Video Oral History Interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, Section A2012_074_001_004, TRT: 4:29:04 ?

In 1965, Marcelite Harris began officer training school at Lackland Air Force Base. She describes her administrative assignments at the 60th Military Airlift Wing of Travis Air Force Base in 1965 and the 71st Tactical Mission Squadron at Bitburg Air Base in West Germany in 1967. She also reflects upon being an African American and a woman in the Air Force. After the missile program was phased out at Bitburg Air Base, Harris was assigned as a maintenance analysis officer. She moved on to maintenance analysis officer training at Chanute Air Force Base only after writing to Colonel Jeanne Holm, who later became the first female one-star general of the Air Force. Harris went on to become the first female maintenance officer in the Air Force. In 1971, she was assigned as the maintenance supervisor for the 49th Tactical Fighter Squadron at the Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base.

United States. Air Force--Officers.

Travis Air Force Base (Calif.)

Air bases, American--Germany.

United States. Air Force--Women.

Air bases, American--Thailand.

Video Oral History Interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, Section A2012_074_001_005, TRT: 5:29:26 ?

Marcelite Harris describes her experience as job control officer at Travis Air Force Base in California. Harris remembers having to fire a master sergeant because he did not get along with the young recruits. She also recalls a difficult situation she handled regarding the inspection of ten F-4 planes. She explains how on-the-job training helped her develop her leadership skills in the U.S. Air Force and shares her leadership philosophy. While at Travis, Harris became field maintenance supervisor of the 916th Air Refueling Squadron. She talks about the sexism she encountered in the military, as well its lack of recognition for black culture in the 1970s. She also shares her opinion on the Vietnam War.

Travis Air Force Base (Calif.)

Sexism.

Vietnam War, 1961-1975.

Leadership.

Video Oral History Interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, Section A2012_074_001_006, TRT: 6:29:40 ?

Marcelite Harris talks about being a member of the Air Force Management Improvement Group and becoming a White House aide during the Carter administration in 1975. During this period, Harris was promoted to Major. In 1978, Harris became the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) of the Air Force Academy in Colorado. While on assignment, Harris met and married fellow AOC, Maurice Harris in 1980. A year later, she was promoted to lieutenant colonel and gave birth to her daughter, Tenecia. Also in 1980, Harris became the maintenance control officer for the 384th Air Refueling Wing at McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. The following year, she became commander of the 384th Avionics Maintenance Squadron. Harris recounts some of her experiences at McConnell and talks about the improvements in her performance reports. She also discusses her assignment to Keesler Air Force Base in 1986 and her thoughts about becoming a general.

United States. Air Force--Management.

United States.--President (1977-1981 : Carter).

United States Air Force Academy.

McConnell Air Force Base (Kan.).

Keesler Air Force Base (Miss.).

Video Oral History Interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, Section A2012_074_001_007, TRT: 7:28:12 ?

Marcelite Harris talks about the publicity she and her family received after becoming a brigadier general in 1991. Additionally, Harris describes the roadblocks she encountered before receiving her promotion as Major general in 1996. Marcelite Harris discusses her participation in NATO's Committee on Women. She admits disliking the group at first and explains how she worked to reorganize the committee in order to improve its functions and impact. In 1997, Harris took a medical retirement because of her high blood pressure. Harris discusses her post retirement activities, which have included receiving an honorary doctorate from her alma mater, Spelman College; working for United States Alliance and serving as chair of the Political Awareness Committee. Furthermore, in 2010, Harris was appointed by President Barack Obama to serve as a member of the Board of Visitors for the United States Air Force Academy.

African American generals--United States.

United States. Air Force.--Appointments and retirements.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Awards.

Video Oral History Interview with Maj. Gen. Marcelite Harris, Section A2012_074_001_008, TRT: 8:31:38 ?

Marcelite Harris talks about her company, Erasta Government Services, her hopes and concerns for the African American community, the burden of being both black and female in the U.S. Armed Services and how she is working to protect the rights of minorities in the military. Harris talks about various organizations she is part of, including Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and Black 100 Women. She reflects upon her legacy as a wife, mother and military professional. She also shares her regrets, talks about her family and how she

would like to be remembered. Harris concludes her interview by describing photographs of her family and career in the U.S. Air Force.

Reminiscing.

Government consultants.

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

Photographs.