

**Clarence W. Dart
Veteran**

**Lt Colonel Robert Von Hasseln
Michael Aikey
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on February 13, 2001
Latham, New York**

Interview begins Lt. Col. Von Hasseln addressing what appears to be an off-camera Press group as well as an on-camera photographer. He says to Clarence that they will speak about 15 minutes initially, take a break, and then let the Press out to make their deadlines.

Q: Interview of Colonel Clarence W. Dart, 13th February, 2001, Latham, New York. Interviewer is Lieutenant Colonel Robert von Hasseln and Videographer is Mr. Michael Aikey. Colonel, one of the things I have always wanted to ask a Tuskegee Airman is. Why did you paint the tails of your planes red?

CD: Well, I'm embarrassed to say I don't know. I guess one of the Ground Crew decided to paint the tails red. I have never heard the story of why they decided to do that because we had other markings. This came about when they brought all four Squadrons together in July of 1944. They were P-51s (North American P-51 Mustang Long-range/single seat fighter-bomber)

I guess one of the Ground Crew figured the red tails would make a distinctive mark for the Group. Why they picked it, I do not know. I will have to inquire about that myself! (laughs) Every Group had distinctive tail markings. The 31st were the Candy Strippers. They had yellow and black stripes on their tails. The 52nd Fighter Group had all yellow tails.

Q: I've been told that American Bomber Pilots used to look, particularly to see the red tails.

CD: That was later on. In the beginning, you heard the story that nobody wanted us because we had bad Press right from day one. Even before they sent us Overseas, people were saying how we were "Too dumb to absorb the knowledge of how to fly an airplane". That was said by a Congressman who had done a study stating our cranial cavities were too small to absorb the knowledge to fly an airplane! (laughter). But what he should have known was that Black people have been flying since everybody else has been flying.

In World War I, Eugene Bullard had to go to France to learn how to fly, and he fought with the French. He got all the Medals just like Henry Johnson did. (William Henry Johnson/ first African American soldier to engage in combat in WW1). Everything that they could award, he earned it. But that did not send up any signals.

Between World War I and World War II, there were two Black Flying Schools. One in Los Angeles, California and one in Chicago, Illinois where people could learn how to repair airplanes or fly them. Then there was Mr. James Banning (flew from LA to Washington, DC) in order to get the Air Corps to admit Blacks into the Air Corp.

Of course you have heard about the woman Pilot, Bessie Coleman. She was a stunt Pilot. The

story goes that she was killed because she hadn't fastened her seat belt while she was doing some sort of aerobatic maneuver.

But, like I say, this business of Black History, I get called every year to speak someplace. A school, a library or something. People forget what Black people have contributed to the history of this Country. In the Military, from Crispus Attucks (first African American killed in Boston Massacre which spurred on the American Revolution) on. The heroism that different Soldiers and Sailors performed.

In the medical field there was Doctor Charles Drew who developed a way to preserve blood Plasma, that was during World War II. Before him was Doctor Daniel Hale Williams who performed the first Open-Heart Surgery. Then there was Garrett Morgan, who invented the stop light, the thing that annoys everybody in this room sometimes! (laughter).

He also invented what finally evolved into the gas mask. His was a breathing apparatus that was used to rescue some people that were working under the lake off the shore in Cleveland. They had an accident there, and his device was used to save some workmen. So, over the years, I could sit here all afternoon and tell you about different Black people who have contributed significantly to the history of this Country. So when World War II came along, and they did not want us to fly because they thought we were too dumb to fly, you know, this was pure prejudice.

Q: Let me ask you a question about that. Now you are not only flying, but you are flying the hottest plane in the American Air Force. How did you feel doing that and yet knowing you could walk into any Officers' Club and they could tell you to get out?

CD: Well, we didn't like it naturally. But eventually, that sort of faded. You've heard the General say that we were requested for escort later on in the War. But at first, they did not want us. Even when we are flying the P-40s (Curtiss P-40 Warhawk single-seat /ground-attack plane) in North Africa and earlier in the War in Italy, we demonstrated that we knew what we were doing.

But there were stories in Time Magazine, and different newspapers back home saying we were afraid to do this, that, and the other thing. On one Mission early on, in one Engagement, we shot down eight German 109s (Messerschmitt Bf 109) in one little affair.

I think we knew all along. We put the pressure on ourselves because we knew, or we thought that if we accomplished what we were put there to do that things were going to be better for people back home. But that didn't come about until the 1960s. Of course, it hasn't gotten there all the way yet but I think it made a big impact on social issues in this Country.

GP: Colonel, is there one particular Mission that stands out in your mind that you were on that was particularly important or dangerous or memorable for some reason?

CD: That's going to be hard to pick (laughter) Maybe it was my last one. The Mission to Berlin when they put up a maximum effort. Every Bomber, for us in the 15th Air Force and every Fighter Group in the 15th Air Force were on a Mission to Berlin. The Germans sent up their new jet fighter the 262 (Messerschmitt Me 262) and our Group shot down three of them. There would have been four except that I was so excited that after I dropped my tanks and I was on this guy's tail, he was only about one hundred yards in front of me and I knew I had him, and the next thing I knew I was counting blades. I had forgotten to switch to my internal

tanks. (laughter) This guy just let out a big cloud of black smoke and took off! But he would have been the fourth one.

GP: And you were shot down a couple of times? Can you tell us about what happened?

CD: Yeah, I can do it now. It used to be embarrassing to say that you got shot down.

(laughter) Now, when you look back... Well, we were relieving some Troops that were pinned down. This was after Mark Clark (youngest 4 star General in US Army during WWII) had started his drive for Rome, Italy. This was during what they called Operation Strangle.

We were supposed to hit anything that moved on the road, which we did. These guys called in that they had been pinned down so we went to relieve them. They were pinned down by some machine gun nest just below Rome. We had a new Flight Leader that day and I don't know what he was thinking about but he set us up in a Gunnery Pattern in trail. We picked out the targets and went in and made one pass. Then we came around for a second pass and there was no return fire either time. But, the third time, the ground opened up and it was the best Fourth of July sight you had ever seen! (laughs)

There were Tracers (projectiles with a pyrotechnic charge) meeting over the Cockpit. Then I heard a big bang and the (@ll:54 unclear term) started coming off like someone was peeling a banana. Then there was another bang, and a hole opened up between my feet at the Rudder Panels. There was a third bang behind the Cockpit. As I was explaining to the Governor that when you are below two thousand feet, you cannot even think about jumping out because the drill was, especially for the P40's that you just rolled it over and fell out. By the time your chute would open, your feet would be on the ground if it opened soon enough.

Anyway, the engine had quit since they shot out my fuel lines. There was oil starting to come across the Cockpit. I picked out what I thought was a smooth field to make a belly landing but it turned out to be a plowed field. So I tried to slow the airplane up as much as possible. Those of you who know about flying, you know can only slow an airplane up just so far if you are not really close to the ground. Otherwise you are going to stall.

Well just before I hit the ground the airplane stalled and one wing dropped down and caught the ground making the airplane cartwheel. The upshot of it was when it came to rest both wings were off, the engine was out of the mount and the tail was broken off and it was just me in the Cockpit. And that is why I have always loved the P40! (laughs) It was a strong airplane!

There were some G.I.s coming over a wall. This was a different place from where we had been doing the Strafing (attacking ground targets from low-flying planes) of course. They had a Medic with them and got me out of the Cockpit. They patched up my bruises and bangs and got me back to my Base.

Q: Clarence, let's take a pause here. Governor, do you have any other questions? You seem to be a natural at this. Anytime you want to change jobs, Sir.

GP: Oh no, I could spend three days with the Colonel just asking questions.

CD: Well, they asked me a couple and I think the worst Missions were the Ploiesti Missions.

GP: Oh, you were on the Ploiesti Missions?

CD: Oh yeah, I escorted two Bomb Missions to Ploiesti (Romania)

Q: Well, just hold onto that story for a moment.

GP: Could I hear it? (laughter) Well, this was an attack on a big oil refinery in Romania where most of the Nazis refined oil came from and it was extremely well-defended.

CD: I think they had two rings of anti-aircraft guns around the Ploiesti Oil Refineries. When they fired, and the shells exploded there was a lot of black smoke. But they fired so much when the wind blew this stuff together, it was just one big black cloud. You could see the Bombers going in one edge of the cloud and when they came off the other end there would be big gaps in the formation so you would know what had happened in between. And we were right with them and I hated it.

I have to explain the whole story of not losing Bombers to enemy Fighters which was true. But this business of being with the Bombers came from Colonel Davis. He said what we had been doing early, which every Fighter Group over there used to do, was to take the Bombers to the I.P., the Initial Point, and then the Bombardier took over. He would fly the airplane through the Bomb Site to the Target, drop his bombs and then on the way out, we would go and pick him up as they came off the Target.

Well he said, "From now on you will stay with the Bombers through the whole Mission." So that was what we did the whole time. Later on the Germans were starting to send their own Fighters up into their own flak (anti-aircraft fire) to shoot down Bombers. So we had to stick right with the Bombers. Of course, we didn't have time to go chasing off anybody. If anybody got in our way, we would shoot them down or do something to discourage them from taking shots at the Bombers. That was why we had to stay with the Bombers all the way through the Missions, we never left them.

GP: One last question, did you actually shoot down any German planes?

CD: No, unfortunately, I got a lot of them on the ground when we did strafing missions, I got some hits. But in a dogfight everything happened so fast that the only time you know you may have done some damage was when they got the Gun Camera films back and developed them. I got credit for some damages but everything happened so fast. You don't want to leave the Bombers when you are told to stay there with them. So if we had chased the German Fighter planes off, we had accomplished our Mission.

18:10 The Governor thanks the Colonel, shakes his hand saying "Absolutely fascination." and they take a break. When they return Clarence is holding some sort of thick, hard-cover book with photos.

CD: (video picks up in mid-sentence) ...the Mechanics, to me, were the heroes. It gets cold in Italy and the conditions those guys had to work under to repair the airplanes. In fact, I did not witness this, but they were telling me about our Line Chief. One of the guys had been in a Prop (propeller airplane). They took it off and got a couple of railroad ties and put the Prop across the ties, took a sledge hammer and beat it back into shape. First they put that thing on the ground and ran over it with a cleat track, they put a crane on it and used it to lift bombs. So they ran over the Prop with that to bend it back into shape and then used sledge hammers to beat it. (laughs) It wasn't exactly in balance but that was what they used! They would work miracles.

We had to borrow spark plugs from the British which were not exactly what should be going into the Allison Engine (V-1710 only American liquid-cooled engine in WW2) On take-off the thing would bark and spit until you really got up to speed and then it was alright.

20:29 – off-camera Chuck Stanley, Governor’s Liaison with Division of Naval Affairs introduces himself and asks “Are you a member of the Empire State Aviation Museum?”

CD: Yeah

Q: Okay, I thought so, so am I. I thought I heard your name come up.

CD: Well, whenever they have Aim-High Day I go out there and try to encourage the kids to stay in school. I’m surprised that some of these kids are not even out of Elementary School and they don’t want to go to school. I don’t understand that. Or the ones in High School, all they can think about is being sixteen years old, dropping out, and getting a job. I ask them “What are you going to do? Are you going to go to some factory or some place and you tell the guy you are applying for a job, what are you going to put down on that application? If you don’t know some math, or read well enough to read some instructions, you are not going to get a job. Even doing some construction work with a pick and shovel, they don’t want you if you can’t read.” I’m surprised, especially a lot of the Black kids we have gotten from Troy and Albany.

Q: I have another question for you, my father was a Bomber Pilot out of Italy, and was curious if you might have escorted him.

CD: I may have.

Q: Were you there in September and October of 1944?

CD: Oh yeah.

Q: Did you ever take a mission over (@22:20 location unclear S-) near Athens?

CD: Greece? Oh yeah.

Q: I know that the 332nd was there, so you might have flown with my father...(OFF CAMERA VOICE – you might not even exist if he wasn’t there! – laughter) So I am especially grateful for that. Also over Blechhammer, Germany?

CD: Oh yea, anyplace in Germany that was a target I think we went to. I had only one beef, I have sort of given it up now but on the way home from (@ 23:05 town?) on the way to Vienna Austria, to the refineries up there, we were coming back. And after a Mission, the Bombers usually get kind of scattered up. So I took my flight and herded up a bunch of Bombers to get them in formation to go home. I escorted these guys for about forty-five minutes, weaving back and forth over them.

Just before we hit the Adriatic Sea I dropped down and crossed under the Lead Bomber and pulled up beside the Pilot and wiggled my wings at him to let him know he was close enough to home that we were leaving him. We were going home to our Base. Then the airplane shuddered and I yelled to my Wing Man to cut it out, quit playing because used to tap wingtips sometimes (laughter) just playing around. He said “I’m not doing anything.”

When I got back to the Base, my Mechanic says “Oh boy, you were really in it today!” I said “What are you talking about?” He said “Look at this!” I was right there in the Cockpit and I had never seen it but there was a line of bullet holes from the left wing tip, of course on a diagonal, right across, right behind the Cockpit and the Tail. They had to take the whole tail off and replace it. My ship was out of commission for about a week. So either one of the Side Gunners or the Belly Gunner had let me have a burst. (laughs) My Commanding Officer sent a

message down and complained about it. But nothing was ever done. I sure would like to find the guy who did it! (laughs)

Q: Did he know who you were?

CD: Well that was what puzzled me because we had been with the guys for about forty-five minutes. We had been weaving over them and all around you know and picking up the strays. This guys should have recognized us. A lot of times people said they confused the P51Bs and Cs with the enemies' Messerschmitt Bf-109s. I don't know whether I startled him or if he was sleeping and woke up and saw this airplane and his reaction was to fire at the airplane. But I am kind of suspicious, because with our markings, he should have known who we were.

Q: Colonel, let's take a break for a minute and do a couple of photographs

.....VIDEO BLANKS OUT @26:31 and picks up @26:38.

Clarence is in mid-sentence and standingI think what they did was hit a couple of mines or something. But that never made it to the newspapers back home. In fact, a lot of our Gun Camera films disappeared. We have asked, but I think they either destroyed them or sold some to commercial people. We have never been able to find them. He then sits and the interview continues.....

Q: Actually, the way we would normally start an interview like this is to ask you, for the record, where you were born and where did you grow up?

CD: Elimra, New York. I was educated through high school there. After I graduated, naturally, you look for a job. The first job I found was working in Rand's Drug Store (@27:47 store name?) stocking shelves. But then my Father found me a job working for Pennsylvania Railroad, cleaning the fire on engines overnight. It determined my course for the rest of my life. I said "If I make it through this, I am going to get an education! I am not going to work like this the rest of my life like my Father was doing." I think his education ended at eighth grade. He was born in Offerman, Georgia and I guess he came North because of better conditions. He got a job on the Pennsylvania Railroad and worked there until he died.

Just an example, to clean a fire on an engine, the coal trains would come up from Pennsylvania at night and you had to clean the fires to get the engine turned around so it could pick up another train overnight. The fire box is probably about the size of somebody's front room. They used to burn this old, dirty coal because you would get what you called "clinkers". You would use a "clinker hook", it was a big, long iron thing with two prongs on it and you would reach in there and break up these "clinkers" and rake the hot fire out. Then you would go out and shake down the ashes that were left into the ash pan. Then you would go get a hose and stick it between the edge of the ash pan and the frame to wash the ashes down into the ash pit.

Well, in the winter time it was cold and sometimes you would miss getting the hose in there and the water would spray all over. You would get soaking wet and you were almost frozen by the time you got finished. So you had to crawl up into the cab and open the fire box door and thaw out before you went to the next engine. Boy, when morning would come I had all I could do to get back home! (laughs) That was not for me, but it was for a lot of people because the railroads paid good you know.

I know they must have made money during the War hauling soldiers and supplies all over the country. Back then, in 1939, it was just about the end of the Depression.

When the War started and Hitler invaded Poland, they started the Civil Defense Classes. I went and took Machine Shop class, and a course in Radio. Then I went to the Elmira Aviation Ground School and trained as an aircraft mechanic and finished that.

When the War did come, I thought I would be ready and set in different places. When the Air Corps came by and the Assessment Team as I mentioned before, I had passed everything and had a good academic background in math and everything. I knew about and could repair airplanes, so I figured I was a shoe-in. Except for my eyes, that sort of messed me up. So I had to wait a year, and then I was accepted. But as I said before, I could not get in until my class was called down in Tuskegee.

My Draft Board, I guess whatever I told them fell on deaf ears because they had no paperwork and were not going to take my word for it. You know how it is during a war, warm bodies are sent anywhere. So they drafted me and I went to Fort Niagara, New York, at the Classification Center. Up there I told them what I could do and I figured they would put me in a good job and I wound up instead in the Field Artillery (@33:14 unclear).

But out there I made an impression on my Company Commander I guess who wanted to send me to become a Second Lieutenant in the Field Artillery School there in Fort Sill, Oklahoma but I turned him down. I guess he was mad at me because he did not give me my Orders until we were at a retreat on a Friday night. But I made it to Tuskegee and that was where things took off.

But I had never been off the ground until I took my first Primary Flight with an Instructor and I never will forget it. I was up there flying, looking around so when I was asked "Do you know the way back?" I said "Oh yeah" so I pointed in the direction I thought the Home Field was. So he rolls the thing upside down and points. We were right over the field! (laughs)

The training went on and I made it through Primary. And then we went to Basic Training in the BT-13s known as the Vultee Vibrator as we called them because they did vibrate! They had an enclosed cockpit and a two position prop on the thing. This was our introduction to a more complex airplane.

From there we went to the AT-6s (North American T-6 Texan) which had retractable gear and a fully controllable prop where we learned procedures and whatnot.

After we finished Advanced Training we checked out in a P-40 (Curtiss Warhawk) which had no dual instruction and a lot of guys were very apprehensive because it was a more powerful airplane. But I know everybody in our class did alright. We got off the ground and got the thing back on the ground without any mishaps.

After we graduated we were commissioned. My Commissioning date was November 3, 1943. Then they shipped us up to Selfridge Field, Michigan for Overseas Training where we learned Dive Bombing and Strafing. Up there we were flying brand new P-40Ns (Curtiss Warhawk) it was lighter than the P-40s we had checked out which was an older model. I don't even know how it flew because it was hot down there in Tuskegee. They tell you to start the thing up, taxi out to the runway then shut the thing down. They had a fire truck out there that would squirt water through the radiator to cool the engine down. Then they would say "Hurry up and start it up and go!" because those things would over-heat on the ground. (laughs)

But up at Selfridge we had the brand new P-40Ns and went through our Overseas Training and then left there and went to Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia and then Overseas on a boat. It took us nine days to get across and we disembarked at Oran in Algeria. From there we went down to the edge of the desert for more training.

The Squadron I was going to, the 99th, which was the first Squadron Overseas, had just left. They had finally chased Rommel out of North Africa. So I caught up with them in Italy at (@37:39 town?). Mt. Vesuvius had just erupted. What a mess it made of that airfield! It destroyed nearly every airplane on the field. Just the weight of the ashes and the stuff that came down broke the wings off the airplanes, it was a mess!

We finally got replacement airplanes, they were not new airplanes. They moved us to a little field just outside town called Chercula (@38:14 spelling?) which is a little suburb of Naples I guess. And that was where we flew most of our Missions from for about the first two or three months. That was where I got my baptism of fire.

The first one of our replacement Group that went over got shot down on his first Mission. (laughs) And of course, that made us all kind of sit up and take note of what we were in for. It wasn't glamorous! Brute Wilson, he was a nice guy but we called him Brute because he was such a mild-mannered guy. He came back with his parachute folded over his arm and shaking his head. (laughs)

I think when I got shot down the first time, it was on my fifth Mission. The Mission I described when we relieved those guys. The second time I got shot down was about five Missions after that. I was up over Anzio (Italy) and we went after that big gun in the hills there.

I flew forty-five Missions in the 12th Air Force. Then in July of '44 the other three Squadrons had come over after we got there. They were flying P-39s (Bell P-39 Airacobra) and doing Harbor Patrol there in Naples, Italy. But for a month, just before we joined them, they had been given P-47s (Republic P-47 Thunderbolt) and they were doing Dive Bombing and Strafing in Northern Italy and Southern France. Then they gave us all brand-new P-51s (North American P-51 Mustang). The difference in airplanes was just like night and day. But the P-40 (Curtiss P-40 Warhawk) was the airplane for the job that it had been doing.

Even though the older guys had shot down ME-109s (Germany's Messerschmitt) with their P-40s when they first went over in '43, it wasn't an airplane that you would go up against with the 190s (Germany's Focke-Wulf FW-190) and their ME-109s. But the P-51 was a different thing altogether. It was just like going from a Ford to a Cadillac. It had all kinds of controls. The Cooling System was automatic.

You've seen the pictures (@41:26 Clarence holds up a model of the plane and points to it as he talks) this part back here would move up and down according to what the thermostat was when they controlled the temperature of the engine. There was a switch on the left hand side that you could set on either manual or automatic. And we had better Flight Instruments. Everything about that airplane was just neat. Of course it was very fast, you would drop the nose and that thing would pick up speed in no time at all. It was very maneuverable.

The other thing was, the first time we went up to passing at 15,000 feet in a Supercharger

(more powerful than a turbocharger engine) and it kicked in it startled me because nobody ever said this was going to happen! (laughs) But from there you could go on up to, well we flew some Missions up to over 30,000 feet.

Then in the winter time we would fly through ice fog up over the Alps. Sometimes you would see a contrail (trail of condensed water) going vertical to you. You couldn't tell, except for watching your instruments, if you were right-side up or not. It was such a dense ice fog that would collect on your wings and on the windshield.

So I just wondered about these poor guys that were going straight down. Am I right side up? (laughs) But you know, people would get vertigo if they didn't watch their instruments. You've been in clouds haven't you? Whether you're a passenger or not if you don't have some reference you can't tell if you are right side up or what.

We had the same problem. A lot of times we had to break up the Bomber Formation and have them orbit on this side of the Alps because they were loaded with bombs they could only go so high. Before we would take them through a pass we would break up our Formations and have a flight of four take a certain bunch through and so on until we got to the other side. A lot of times, once you got to the other side of the Alps, the weather was fine. So then we would get everybody back into Formation and go on to the target.

Q: Now you flew a total of ninety-five Missions?

CD: Forty-five in the 12th Air Force and fifty in the 15th.

Q: And most of your Missions in the 15th were Bomber escorts?

CD: Well, not most of them because I escorted photo-recs (aerial reconnaissance) a couple of times. They were stripped down B-51s with the cameras pointed out the back, front, and down below. But they were stripped down and had no armor or guns. We had an awful time keeping up with them because we had the wing tanks and were slower than them. We would always be full throttle trying to keep up with those guys. (laughs) They were brave guys because a lot of the time they would go out alone to get pictures of targets. They were starting to get shot down.

The Germans were using what they called the "Komet", the ME-163s (Messerschmitt Me 163 Komet), those little bat-wing things. They were rocket-powered and they were shooting down our photo-recs. They would send us along sometimes to escort and protect them.

We did do some Strafing Missions. In one field I think we destroyed sixty-some plus airplanes. Then we flew Missions to cover the liberation of some P.O.W.s. The rest of the Missions were all Bomber escorts.

Q: Now, B.O. Davis, Jr, was he your Squadron Commander?

CD: He was when I first went over. But then he came back and left George Roberts in command of the 99th. While he came back and formed the 100th 301st and 302nd Squadrons. They came over afterwards. After he finished his Missions and came home, then Bill Campbell was my Squadron Commander.

Q: What kind of morale or attitude did the men have at the time?

CD: The morale was always high because the whole theme was... I don't know if you have read

it in some of the books but if you asked any of the Tuskegee Airmen, the idea was to make it through the Program. But I learned this about ten years ago when I was having dinner down in Bowling Field with some guys that the established criteria for our graduation was based on what it was for the white cadets at other fields. Even though we only had one source of candidates, they were washing guys out that were Pilots, had their licenses and had gone through the CPT Program. Do you remember that? The Civilian Pilot Training Program. Nearly every college in the country had it.

And some of those guys were getting washed out because they had this quota system. But it was unfair because if there was a larger group of people and if they washed out so many and you applied that percentage to us then you were washing out people that should not have been washed out. If it hadn't happened, we would have had many more Pilots. I guess there were four hundred and fifty Fighter Pilots that went overseas. Out of that number I think we lost sixty six. People that were shot down or lost because of mechanical failure or something like that.

Q: What was your last Mission?

CD: My last Official Mission was to Berlin, Germany and the one I recounted here before about when my moment of glory disappeared. Here I had flown in ninety-five Missions, and I forgot something I had been doing automatically for almost nine months. You drop your wing tanks if you are going to dog-fight and you automatically reach down and switch to your internal tanks. And I had forgotten to do it because I was so excited about seeing this jet in front of me and I was going to let him have it! (laughs) Then, after that, they grounded me because my Commanding Officer said "You've had enough, you have to go home." I said, "No, no, the War is almost over." He said "Nah." So they sent me back.

I went to Tuskegee and was an Instructor down there for a while. Then they sent me to Instrument Instructor School at Barksdale Field in Louisiana. And I came back and they made me the Head of the Instrument School. When they closed down Tuskegee, they shipped us all up to Lockbourne (Air Force Base) outside Columbus, Ohio.

But you can imagine all these people up there, and jobs were few. They did make me a Squadron Commander of Recruits and you had to fight for flying time. So I said this is for the birds. I got out and went Aero Industries Technical Institute in Oakland, California. I was going to try and get a job with the aircraft factories, but they were laying people off at the time. The War was over and the Military contracts had been canceled. So I came back East and got a job with G. E. (General Electric Company) and stayed there for thirty-nine years and two months. I retired in 1987.

Q: Now, after the War were you originally in the Air Force Reserves?

CD: Oh yeah, I joined. You know, they offered to everybody who wanted in the Reserves. Some people took it and some people didn't. I took it because you could fly in temporary Active Duty. Not legally, because if you hadn't flown for a certain length of time you would get grounded. Like up at Presque Isle in Maine. Whenever they had to go someplace to pick up parts or something, they would need a Co-Pilot and would say "Come on, you can fly" and I would say "But it's not legal" and they would just say "Never mind, we got to go get that." (laughs)

Q: Which Air Force Reserve Unit were you in?

CD: I keep looking for that, it was out of Glens Falls. Do you remember when they built the

Center down here in Albany and it was supposed to be for everybody? All the Armed Services, of course. The Air Force finally moved out and the Navy moved out. And I guess it wound up with the Army. So our Reserve Unit for my area moved to Glens Falls. I don't recall the Unit Number, but after Doctor Eisenhower died, I took over as the Commander of the Reserve Unit up there until they put me out of the Reserves.

Q: What kind of Unit was it?

CD: I have forgotten what it was called, but it was a conglomerate because we all had different A.F.C.s (Army Futures Command) you know. And they would go off to different Units in the summer. We took courses you could get through the Air Corps. I took Command and Staff school and graduated from that.

I tried to get back in during the Korean War. I applied because they were asking Pilots to come back. I sent in my paperwork and I never heard from them for a long while. And then they sent me a letter that said they didn't need anybody with my A.F.C. I said something seemed screwy here that they don't need ex-Fighter Pilots. Then I found out that I was in a critical position in the lab there so G.E. wouldn't let me go. Somebody squashed my application.

Q: When did you retire from the Air Force Reserves?

CD: Let me see, when was it when they finally told me I had been there too long? (laughs) I think it was 1985, just before I retired from G.E. I retired from G.E. in 1987.

Q: What have you been doing since you retired?

CD: I have been busy. I was on Niagara Mohawk's Consumer Advisory Counsel for seventeen years. Shortly after that I was asked to be on the Board at The Charlton School, which I still am. Then I was on the Advisory Board of The Salvation Army and still am. I have been President of that Board off and on for better than thirty years hasn't it? (Clarence's wife is off camera and answers him with "it's been a long time") And then with the Museum.

Q: That's a pretty busy retirement!

CD: Well, I think so.

Q: Do you have any children or grandchildren?

CD: Yeah, we had eight children, and it will be six grandchildren next month. Staying in the Reserves helped me put my kids through college. That was where my Reserve pay went.

Q: That is a good way to use your Reserve pay.

CD: Yeah.

Q: Let's go back a bit. Your first mission in combat, what was that like? You've just finished all your training and now you are Overseas, what must you have been thinking?

CD: Aside from being shot at, I was a little apprehensive knowing what my friend went through on his first Mission. But after a while it was just, well it's not bravado or anything, you just sort of get used to it. You've got a job to do and what happens, happens. It was a little disconcerting some nights when you go to Mess and somebody who was there in the morning isn't there that night. But you could not let that dwell on you.

Q: So at first you were a little apprehensive and then you got used to it?

CD: Well yes, I guess you adopt a sort of a fatalistic attitude. Because if you don't you are not

going to be able to do your job.

Q: Tell me about your Mission in Anzio.

CD: Well you've heard of, like that fellow who took the pictures here, he knew about, "Anzio Annie" (Germany's largest railway gun) it's down in Maryland right now at the Ordinance Museum. They had a couple of those things and one was firing out there at the ships in the harbor that were bringing in supplies to the Beachhead. Our job this day was to try to skip a bomb into the mouth of the tunnel and bottle the thing up but it only came out at night.

We had to get down low enough to be on a level with the tunnel to get a bomb in there. Just as we were approaching this thing and getting closer to the German defense line I heard this "bang". Then in the next thirty seconds I saw that my airplane was on fire! I guessed that whatever it was that hit the engine must have cut the fuel lines and it sprayed over the engine. So I went down low and thought that if I keep the engine running long enough maybe I could get up to enough altitude to jump out. But then I looked and saw I was getting close to the German line.

If I jump out, the prevailing winds...all this is going through my mind that quick...it's going to blow me right over across the lines. (laughs) So I turned and thought maybe I can make it back, they had an Emergency Strip on the Beachhead.

This day we were carrying a five-hundred pound bomb on the Center-line, and two fry Clusters, one under each wing. They weighed two-hundred and fifty pounds each. So I turned and I'm trailing all of this black smoke across the sky. I looked back and I could see this big, black circle I'm making and the guys are yelling "Get out! Get out!" But I'm trying to make it to this Emergency Field on the Beachhead.

I get down low enough and see I'm not going to make it. I see this clump of trees and think "Well, if I can put it down in this clump of saplings it will probably cushion the impact." It just so happened that there was this battery of 155 "Long Toms" (US Artillery 155mm guns) that I spotted at the last minute and so I had to turn away. So I got rid of the bombs, I dropped them safe, I didn't pull the Arming Wires, but I must have scared those guys to death.

I spotted this little dirt road that was just off to my left so I put the thing down on this dirt road. I just rolled the canopy back, in a P40 you roll the canopy back by hand. There is a little knob on the handle that you push in to detach. When I hit the ground I skidded along with the canopy going "Kallang!" (laughs) When the airplane comes to a stop, the flames are coming up around the Cockpit on both sides and then I got a little bit excited.

So I unfastened my harness, I tried to get the canopy back open but it jammed. I got my feet under me and with my back I popped that canopy off! I don't know where I got the strength, but I popped the canopy off, hopped out and started running down the road with my parachute banging at my heels. I get about an eighth of a mile down the road and heard a big "Ballump!" and they blew up.

[VIDEO GOES OUT AT 1:04:49 AND RETURNS AT 1:04:53]

CD: continues in mid-sentence: those films after the War. They just disappeared.

Q: So you've got a total of three 262's (German Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighters)

CD: Yeah, the group did, yeah.

Q: Now, were the Germans using better Pilots for those, or were they using whoever they could get?

CD: No, some of the Pilots were veteran Pilots. Most of, the sad thing, well I don't mean to say sad because it was a good thing, was they had lost most of their Pilots after the Battle of Britain (@1:05:36 unclear). Sometimes we were fighting and knew we were flying against kids. They were right out of high school. In fact, they had an evasive maneuver that they tried to pull off by rolling over and doing what you call a "Split S" and they weren't high enough. They would roll over and try to pull through to get away from us and go "POW!" right into the ground.

Q: Did you ever get to meet any German Veterans?

CD: Oh yes! Incidentally, one of the guys who was a Night Fighter Pilot Hans? (Mrs. Dart replies "Yeah") he was the President of a paper company up in Glens Falls. (laughs) I think his last name was Hoect I think it was spelled Hoect (@1:06:30 spelling?) We used to sit down and talk.

Q: What was his perception of fighting?

CD: Well he blamed the Government naturally. Hitler made lots of mistakes. "If he had listened to his Generals and Commanders maybe we would have eventually won the War. But it would have been much more difficult". Their technology was way ahead of ours except for maybe the radar. But as far as the airplanes were concerned, they had airplanes coming along that I don't think, unless we had matched it, it would have been very difficult for us to continue our bombing campaigns.

Q: What was their toughest planes that you were flying against?

CD: Well, the Me 109s were tough and the 190s were tougher. They had a few of their latest models, the FW 190s that if they had gotten those into full production we would have had a tough time.

Q: How were they better?

CD: Just technically better. In fact, I am quite sure that.... we had a captured FW 190, I forgot what Field it was at, and it had circuit breakers. Everything else used to be fuses, you know. It had circuit breakers and the way you unlocked the tail wheel to make sharp turns in the 51 was the same way the Germans had in the FW 190. You would push the stick full forward and the tail wheel would unlock. So you could make sharp turns on the ground. There was just a whole lot of stuff that the Germans had. Like I said, technically they were ahead of us.

Q: How about their tactics? How were those in comparison to yours?

CD: Well see, they had fought several wars. The Spanish Revolution, the Invasion of Poland, they were very experienced at air warfare. In fact, when we first got there they were trying to teach us the British method of Formation Flying, Company Front with everybody wingtip to wingtip. But then when you made a turn, the Leader was on the left end, and they call out "break" and everybody is making a turn, you don't know what the guy behind you is doing because you can't see him. (laughs) And you are wondering if the guy in front of you knows where you are! You had to make a hundred and eighty-degree turn or even a ninety-degree turn flying Company Front. That was hairy! Then we picked up what the Germans were doing, they were flying The Finger Four.

Q: Explain that?

CD: The Finger Four is that the Leader has a Wing Man and then the second element was flying on the other side of the Leader with his Wing Man. You could maneuver in either direction and everybody could see everybody.

Q: That turned out to be a better way?

CD: Oh yeah, everybody picked that up later on in the War. But in the first few months they were flying that Company Front style. Especially if you get a Formation of more than four airplanes, you get a whole Squadron of sixteen planes up there with each flying Flight Company Front you can imagine what a hairy thing that was! (laughs)

Q: Wow! Colonel, let's go back and talk about something we kind of touched on but not really gone into any depth on. The segregation that existed in the Army in those days. How did it personally affect you?

CD: Well, actually I really did not pay much attention to it. Except if you got off Base say like when I was in the Field Artillery. We had to ride in the back of the bus. Or if you tried to go to a movie theater you had to sit in a special section way up in the balcony in the back or something like that.

And then when we got Commission and went in town the Enlisted men would not salute you. You could not do anything about it. In fact, being an Officer was kind of like being a lightning rod. You would get all kinds of insults.

Q: And there was nothing you could do about it?

CD: No. In fact, I remember Black M.P.s (Military Police) I forgot where it was, arrested a Civilian for attacking one of the Black Soldiers, and they almost got Court Martialed.

Q: But you are fighting against Nazi Germany, a racist state, didn't it ever strike you as strange?

CD: I don't even think we thought about it. Our whole thing was to accomplish our Mission. We didn't really run into it that much, it was only here in the States that happened. There were a few Outfits over there, but in the heat of battle they were glad we were there. You've heard the stories about how they requested our escort.

And socially, it was alright. We used to go to different Bases. We only had one example of prejudice. One of the Bombers made an emergency landing at our Base and the guy wrote a letter home to his wife about having to sleep in "N..." beds and eat "N..." food. But that was the only one I ever heard about. Most of the times we interacted with other Units.

Q: Did you ever feel any particular responsibility or burden of being a Tuskegee Airman, or being a pioneer? Did you feel like the eyes of the world were upon you?

CD: Only, like I said, in 1994 when people found out I was a Tuskegee Airman. (laughs) I didn't feel I could use that to be a role model. I always tried to live and act responsibly. That this is the way a person should conduct themselves and what they should do, get your education.

Q: When you were overseas in the Squadron did you all know about how much coverage you

were getting back home in the Black press?

CD: Oh in the Black press? Yeah. Well Charles Francis, the guy who wrote the first book *The Tuskegee Airmen, The Men Who Changed a Nation* was sending stories back. But the White press, and it surprised me about *Time Magazine* because I used to think they were always a fair magazine. I remember when I earned a subscription to Time Magazine, I guess I was in eighth grade or grammar school I won some kind of award and was given a subscription. I was surprised that they had not bothered to find out how things were really going for us overseas. One of our Combat Instructors Overseas was Colonel Cochran.

Q: Philip Cochran?

CD: Yeah..He was Flip Corkin in the funny papers. He smoothed out some of our techniques. But then we developed our own techniques after a while. The way we improved our accuracy in Dive Bombing was like say we were attacking a gun position or something. You would go over the target, of course you were being shot at all at the same time, you would peel off and then you would go vertical.

Each guy would take a turn and go vertical over the target and if you were off a little bit you would roll around and fire your guns and see where the Tracers hit. And then you would let the bomb go. (laughs) You know it was going to be right on target.

I was always amazed at the Germans. You would be coming up at a target, they would pick you up with these 88s, a wonderful gun (8.8 cm Flak anti-aircraft gun). But they were stupid, they would fire the first burst and bracket you. But they would never, at least I found they wouldn't close the darn thing down. Because if they had, they would have hit everybody in the Formation.

Because in a Flying Finger Formation there would be two persons in front and two behind. (laughs) So once that happened, you know, you would start (@1:18:18 unclear term) moving around and they could not zero in on you.

But I got to see one of those 88s on the ground. I think it was the equal to anything you might see today. It had this board on, like the entrance box into your house with all this electronic stuff in there.

That was why they were so darn accurate. They would get the coordinates and whatever and were almost automatic. I used to think somebody was carrying those things around on their shoulder and firing it like a rifle because they were so accurate. They would have you bracketed, at the first burst we would always be right in the middle. (laughs) I would say, if they ever get smart we were in trouble!

Q: So looking back now, after all these years what do you think was the true significance of the Tuskegee Airmen?

CD: Well, the fact that we disproved everything that they said before we went in Service; and proved that we could do the job. And I think we pointed out that anybody, I don't care what their race and nationality is, if you got the training they could do a job.

That is proved of the immigrants we have coming over here now, the Japanese, Chinese, Indians who come over here now and go to our schools and get jobs in our factories and corporations. I don't know if you fellows see *Ebony Magazine* on a regular basis, but every month in there they have pictures of these Black Americans that are now C.E.O.s (Chief Executive Officer) of some of the largest corporations we have in this country. I think maybe

we had something to do with it by proving getting an education and training you can accomplish something.

When I first started reading the *Magazine*, it amazed me the strides people have made in the industry. But it has to go a little bit further like I say, a lot of people probably call me an “Uncle Tom” but in this day and age you can’t ask for something if you aren’t prepared to bring something to the table.

It just angers me like these clowns Sharpton (Al Sharpton American Civil Rights Activist) and Jesse Jackson (American Political Activist) make all these wonderful speeches. And I know there are prejudices still in this country and a lot of it has gone underground, so to speak and is still in existence. But the only way to defeat it is to prove that you can do whatever it is that confronts you.

Q: And that was part of the Tuskegee Experiment?

CD: Yeah. A couple of my classmates, one was Hannibal Cox he was Vice President, of course this goes way back now in the early ‘80s, he became Vice President of Eastern Airlines. And George

“Spanky” Roberts was a bank Vice President, not of a Black bank, but of a White bank. There were a couple of other guys who became Vice Presidents of large corporations.

Jimmy Plinton started his own airline down near the Bahama Islands. He also started a dry cleaning business down there. Before, when you went to the Bahamas you had to take your white linen suits because they could be laundered and starched or whatever. Well, when Jimmy started his dry-cleaning business, then people could go down there with the same summer clothes that we wore up here and get them dry-cleaned. He was knighted by the head of one of the governments down there. Then he was partners in his own airline.

Q: Did you ever run across a Ground Officer by the name of Herman Johnson from the Midwest?

CD: Yes, I know Herman. I knew him when he was a kid in my home town of Elmira. His Aunt and Uncle lived there. I was at the ceremony when he got the plague over there in Albany. I know him, his father was Henry Johnson. He says he was a Tuskegee Airman, I never met him though. I don’t know what Unit he served in.

Q: Well, you had a pretty big day today huh?

CD: Yeah.

Q: How does it feel to be interviewed about all this?

CD: Well, like I say, I’m not an out front type of person. Until that picture showed up in the Daily News I had never mentioned, even to my kids, I never told them what I did. My son’s a school teacher and he had me go over to his school one day and talk to a couple of classes. I’ve been to a lot of schools around the Capital District and I’ve been to a prison down near Newburgh, N.Y.

Q: Do you think it is important for kids to hear about this?

CD: I try to present it in a way that I use myself as a role model of what can be accomplished if you just put forth the effort. I try to make the contrast between what other people have done and what a lot of these kids look up to and get the gold earrings and drive fancy cars by messing with the drug business. There is no future in it. I try to point this out to them. I tell

them I feel good when I go to bed every night with not anything pressing on my mind except maybe worrying about what the kids are doing like keeping up their college grades. Having a clear conscience where these other people are worrying about if the Feds are on to them or whether some other drug dealer is going to blow them away for their territory. It's just plain stupidity. God gave you a beautiful body, why would anybody mess it up with something that is going to destroy you eventually? Either yourself, or somebody else.

Q: One of the reasons we did this Oral History Program was because we wanted people to be able to hear this now and in the future and on a more widespread basis. I'm glad you could come today. I don't know if you were nervous, but I was certainly nervous. Especially having the Governor conducting some of the interview.

CD: No, I've been near people like him before. (laughs)

Q: He did a pretty good job asking questions though didn't he?

CD: Oh yeah. Well, he's a politician, he's a lawyer isn't he?

Q: Yeah. I also think he likes history too.

CD: I'd like to engage him in a political debate sometime! (laughs)

Q: Well, you get the final word Colonel. Anything else you would like to add?

CD: Well, I didn't finish the whole story.

Q: Which one?

CD: Coming back from Overseas.

Q: Go right ahead.

CD: It didn't happen to me, but it did happen to some of my friends. Coming off the boat there were signs directing them where to go. They were segregated. They had been Overseas for over a year or more and you come home and you are segregated. You go to a Base and the German Prisoners of War are being treated better than you are. That really is a slap in the face. There was a lot of bitterness among a lot of the fellows when they came back and ran into that kind of nonsense. But it was fostered by people in our government and military.

Q: The same kind of people who said your brains were too small.

CD: Yeah. And what kind of picture does that show the rest of the world? In fact, one kid when I was talking at the first speech I gave at the Museum. This little boy jumps up and says "Well why did you go and fight for a country like this?" I had to tell him that this is my country. I was born and raised here and it is the only country I know.

I have a lot of problems with people trying to make their connections to Africa. Sure, we are decedents of African slaves but individually there aren't many people who can go back and find out what their lineage is or what tribe their ancestors came from. I think they speak about two thousand different languages in Africa and there', I don't know, how many tribes. I said Africa is not a place I would want to be in this particular time.

It's a beautiful country, I experienced it but I don't see the connection. I think the connection they are making is an image. Of course, Africa, especially the Zulu Tribes have a real good history. There were Kings and Queens, and Princes in several of the areas. But look at what they are doing, they are killing themselves over there. When the Colonists left, England,

France and Belgium like when England left Nigeria, they were one of the richest countries in the World when they left between their oil production and other natural resources. But that inner-tribal fighting just destroyed the country. After the Belgians left the Congo, look at the mess they got in over there. And when the French left their sections of Africa it was a mess.

I mean I am proud of my heritage. My Grandmother was a slave. Though there is a dispute about what age she was when she died, she lived to be at least one hundred years old. And I am proud of that, but I myself don't see any great linkage to Africa because I was born and raised here and this is where my roots are. I'm proud of the people that were African slaves and some of their immediate descendants' contributions to this country.

Of course, I know this is probably on tape and after the general public hears it I'm toast! (laughs) It's just a thought, the way I think that you don't have to give up anything by doing the right thing. It's just the effort you should put out and then if you do that, then make your demands. We have enough laws on the book now that you should be able to get whatever you ask for within reason.

Q: So, always bring something to the table.

CD: That's right. If you can prove yourself. Well, it's been done. Anybody, like the Astronauts, you can do it. So what does color have to do with it? Or nationality or gender, whatever? And I think the sooner this country wakes up to it fully the better or we might be in trouble later on. I am always fearful that these emerging nations, as they are called, are going to one day wake up and join together and we would be in trouble trying to fight the whole world. I don't trust them.

I was always in favor of this "nuclear umbrella", an anti-missile defense. A lot of people say "You can't do it." I think we have been able to do anything that we put our minds to and eventually they will develop one. I don't trust Saddam Hussein, I don't trust Iran. In fact I don't trust a couple of the countries that are NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) Allies. I think they would stab us in the back in a minute. I don't trust the Chinese, definitely I don't trust them because of their attitude.

(SOMEONE OFF CAMERA IS CHUCKLING AT HIS ABOVE STATEMENT)

If G.E. or BOEING wants to sell something to them, they demand that we transfer our technology to them before they buy anything. And, of course, it's the hungry C.E.O.s of these companies they buy into that instead of saying "Oh well, forget it" because they feel China is a big market and it's too bad.

Of course, I realize there aren't too many airlines around here now that are able to afford any more airplanes because they are all mortgaged up to the hilt like us with credit cards. (laughs)

Q: True. You betcha. Mike let me just check, do you have any questions that you want to add? Mrs. Dart, this is your big chance. Do you have any questions you want to ask your husband? We have him on camera now. [NONE ARE SPOKEN BY MRS. DART]

Q: Okay Colonel, back to you for the final word. Anything else you would like to add?

CD: No. Anything else would probably get into politics and I don't want to go there. (laughs)

Q: Thank you.