

Interviewer:

Good afternoon. It's the 19th of May. We're in our Thayer Hall studio. Sir, if you could just introduce yourself to the camera, and then spell your first and last name for the transcriber for us, please.

Joseph Anderson:

Okay. I'm Joseph Benjamin Anderson, Jr. First name Joseph, J-O-S-E-P-H, last name Anderson, A-N-D-E-R-S-O-N.

Interviewer:

Okay. And sir, today we're here to conduct an interview in support of our project on the African-American military experience, and you're here for your 50th class reunion as part of the class - as our former Department Head used to say - of the distinguished class of 1965.

Joseph Anderson:

That is exactly right.

Interviewer:

Right. I figured he was right about that one. And generous class of 1965, absolutely, having just come from Arvin Gym, which has your classmate's name on the front, obviously, and a lot of things inside.

Joseph Anderson:

And we did a gift for oral history.

Interviewer:

Yes; absolutely.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And for that we are rather thankful. So sir, if you could tell us just a little bit about your background prior to coming to West Point - high school, growing up, family, that kind of thing - that'd be a good start point.

Joseph Anderson:

Okay. I grew up in Topeka, Kansas. I was the youngest of four children to my parents, Joseph B. Anderson, Sr., and my mother, Pearl Anderson. I think we would be characterized more as upper lower class or lower middle class in terms of social status. My father worked for the Santa Fe Railroad as a laborer, eighth grade education. My mother was a homemaker, but did odd jobs hither and yon in terms of selling insurance, working for Macy's, that kind of thing. I was raised in a very supportive and cohesive family unit that was very busy. My father worked for the Santa Fe Railroad 8:00 to 5:00, but also did a number of other things, like the town photographer for African-Americans at that time, and he took photographs of all the weddings, and funerals, and graduations, and that kind of thing.

And so we did a lot of the things that families then did in a relatively segregated environment, in that I went to segregated grade schools. Brown vs. the Board of Education is my class, and so Reverend Brown's name is on the lawsuit, along with other communities and so forth.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so I went to Washington Grade School, East Topeka Junior High School, which was integrated, and then Topeka High School, which was integrated. Going from a grade school which was totally segregated to a junior high, the transition was good. I eventually wound up being President of the junior high class my ninth grade year. Went on to high school, and excelled in sports, as I did in junior high - football, basketball.

President of various clubs, a most honored senior, so had a very good education and upbringing, with good grades all the way through. And participated in a number of

community activities, to include Boy Scouts, church activities that my parents belonged to, and as I say to friends, the first time I was free not to go to church was after I graduated from West Point, because my parents made sure I went every Sunday, and so did West Point.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so I anticipated going to University of Kansas in engineering. I look back on it and wonder how I would've anticipated getting that paid for with my father's financial status and so forth, but had a couple of smaller scholarships coming through high school. But went away to my junior year to Boys State, and at Boys State I was selected by my peers to go to Boys Nation.

Interviewer:

Okay.

And so when I went to Washington, D.C., to Boys Nation, I had a good experience. Came back to Topeka to do my senior year in high school when I got a postcard from West Point, and West Point said, "Congratulations on having been 1 of 100 young men that went to Boys Nation. If you're interested in knowing more about West Point, and perhaps attending the Academy, fill out this postcard and we'll send you the information." And so that was the beginning of where I evolved to get to this institution. In perspective, I did not know anything about the Army and/or West Point, and so I thought the Army-Navy game was between the United States Army and the United States Navy. And that was different than the West Point Story on TV.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so that's my background and knowledge, and that's how it evolved. And I applied to the Senator from Kansas, Senator Carlson. I was his second alternate, and in June of 1961, I got a phone call from West Point saying the principle and the first alternate didn't make it, and if you are interested, show up on the 7th of July - I think, 5th or 7th of July - and you'll join the class of 1965. I showed up, and I did.

Interviewer:

What a deal. So summer of 1960, Boys Nation, you said going into your senior year.

Joseph Anderson:

Correct.

Interviewer:

So knew nothing about West Point. Anybody in your family been in the military that you knew of, or?

Joseph Anderson:

My father - excuse me - none of my family other than my brother. My brother had been in Korea.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

He'd been an enlisted man in Korea, and so went to Korea. As soon as it was out, as soon as it was over with, he got out and moved to California, so I had no familiarity or experience with the military at all.

Interviewer:

Wow. That's quite a culture shock, showing up on R Day with nothing in background, huh?

Joseph Anderson:

That's correct.

Interviewer:

So one of the things, obviously, prior to and still for a few years after your class, the number

of African-Americans coming in every year was still pretty low. Do you recall how many came in with you that year?

Joseph Anderson:

Oh, I absolutely do. Out of our class of 900, 6 African-Americans came in, and 4 of us graduated out of 596, so the attrition rate was about the same. And so during the four years that I was here, the largest number of any class, the Plebe class, was Colonel Jordan's class coming in had eight.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

So Fred Gordon was a senior my Plebe year, and had one person in his class.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And that Plebe year, there were a total of 11 African-Americans out of the Corps.

Interviewer:

Wow. So not very many at all.

Joseph Anderson:

Correct. And in my class, there were four of us that continued into the academic year, two in the First Regiment, two in the Second Regiment.

Interviewer:

So the four - or the six was down to four at the end of Beast Barracks -

Joseph Anderson:

Correct.

Interviewer:

And that number stayed for the -

Joseph Anderson:

And the four of us made it all the way through.

Interviewer:

All the way through.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Right. I know at least two of you are here this week, so that's awesome.

Joseph Anderson:

So - exactly, and so if anybody had guard duty, there was no bid whist game that weekend.

Interviewer:

Once the one person's out, there goes the group, right?

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

So coming from - you said you went to an integrated school in the junior and senior high school levels after the segregated elementary school, or grade school back then.

Joseph Anderson:

Correct.

Interviewer:

What did new Cadet expect, what did a new Cadet expect in terms of coming to West Point, in terms of the racial situation, or what were your expectations coming in, or did you even have any knowledge of -

Joseph Anderson:

I had no thoughts or feelings about it. Again, I was always a good student, and so I anticipated that I would do okay academically. As most of us experience, we're superstars where we come from, and then we become maybe-stars once you get here, 'cause the place is full of superstars.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so Captain of my football team, coming to West Point and Army, I barely made the football team, you know, and so forth and so on. Thoughts about race were a non-issue in my thinking and experience, because the junior high and high school experiences of integrated schools had been very comfortable, and I was accepted and had opportunities to take on leadership positions and responsibilities, and so forth. And I can talk further about the Academy experience as a freshman that actually turned out quite well.

Interviewer:

Okay, so whatâ€™s your, you know, the feeling that, you know, obviously, it turned out well when itâ€™s you graduated -

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Went on, and did great things later, but.

Joseph Anderson:

But in the West Point experience, when I arrived, I had no anticipation of the stress, and pressure, and discipline. And within that first week, I said, â€œHey, this is not for me; Iâ€™m ready to go back and go to the University of Kansas.â€ And then they took the entire class up to meet with the Chaplain, and the good news is the Chaplain shared with us and said that this is only a test, nothing personal. The Upperclassmen that are screaming at you, and running your neck in, and sending you on all kind of dress drills, and so forth, are not doing it because itâ€™s you, but because theyâ€™re trying to determine whether you can handle the pressure. And I received the same experience that everybody else did, and so I didnâ€™t feel that there was any racial concerns or issues about that. That further reinforced itself when at Plebe Christmas, back before your time, when there was a Corps -

Interviewer:

Absolutely, sir.

Joseph Anderson:

We did not go home for Christmas.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And I was a Battalion Commander at Plebe Christmas among our class that stayed over. And then when spring break, when the Upperclassmen all left again, I was a Regimental Commander. And so my perspective on the Academy, and my ability to lead, and compete, and perform, and achieve, was very solid, very supportive. And so I had a very good feel about that, and the thing Iâ€™ve always said to any number of people is in my four years here, I never heard the N word. And so Iâ€™m very proud to say to people that none of my class, or nobody in the institution, had any hard feelings about me being here as an African-American - that I observed.

Interviewer:

Right. Thatâ€™s great. So following up on that thought, what were your relationships like with your roommates over your time as a Cadet, and you know, how do you look back at those?

Joseph Anderson:

No issues. You know, my Beast Barracks roommates were fine. I had roommates from Georgia, and classmates, and all that, and there were no issues that I can identify that were concerned. I didnâ€™t hear them, I didnâ€™t hear about them having any feelings about me as an African-American. They did not express any feelings toward me as an African-American. There may have been one small incident where I may have done something at

the dinner table, and, you know, reached into somebody's plate or did something, and the guys said, "Hey, please don't do that," you know, and that could've been something. But that's as big a deal as I experienced among my class.

Interviewer:

Do you think that among - and obviously, you talked a lot, maybe not every day, given the constraints of Plebe year in those days. But do you think that was a similar experience across the other three African-American Cadets in your class who went through all four years, or do you think that was just luck of the draw for yourself?

Joseph Anderson:

I think it was relatively the same experience for all of us. One of the four of us spent a lot of time on the Area, but he did things that deserved putting him on the Area. One of the other guys was a leader, and a third guy was quite an athlete, you know, lettered in Track and so forth, so. And in my own case, I sang in the Glee Club, I sang in the Choir. I was a lead soloist for the Glee Club on many trips and so forth, so again, no issues, no constraints about me being accepted in the class. The only time it really came up is when we would take class trips; and so when we would go to Fort Benning, Georgia, and so forth -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Then it became an issue. But the Corps and the class were very supportive. When we went to Fort Benning, they brought young ladies over from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and we had them as escorts and dates and so forth, and other than that, that was the only indication that we were treated and perceived differently than the rest of the class, who would be provided dates from Columbus, Georgia.

Interviewer:

Somewhere closer, right. Yeah, I've heard that story from - you mentioned John Gordon already -

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

I've heard that story from him, also. What about the instructors? Anything stand out to you in looking at how you were treated by the instructors here, other than any other Cadet?

Joseph Anderson:

Not until my Firstie year. So again, my experience was relatively good, and I was, you know, a decent student. Again, not the all-A student that I'd been in junior high and high school, but a decent student where I didn't have to take extra make-up exams and that kind of thing. I was told that I tested such coming in that I would have to take probably some make-up activities in English. As it turns out, I never took an exam in English, 'cause I tested out of the exam, so that says something about the testing system, that it didn't reflect accurately on my ability to communicate.

Interviewer:

That's great. So you said you can't think of a lot of things over the years where there was either an overt attempt by either the institution or people, other than the class trips to the South perhaps, where race was really an issue. Was there ever a sense that, you know, among the African-American Cadets, that you guys were - I'm not sure how to call it - but an informal club, just based on race? Or was the system at West Point rigid enough that communicating that way across, at that time, both Regiments, was too hard to do that?

Joseph Anderson:

I think it was too hard for us to get together and interact with each other as a foursome. And so two of us were in the First Regiment, myself and Jim Conley. Art Hester and Hal Jenkins were in the Second Regiment. Hal was on the Track Team and traveled all the time, and so we never had any experience with the Corps perceiving us as "the four African-Americans," in my experience and knowledge.

Interviewer:

Okay. You mentioned the one thing with the Instructor First Class year. You talk about that a little bit more for us?

Joseph Anderson:

Yes. The only real disappointment and, in all accuracy, sense of pain and difficulty with the Academy was when I came up to Firstie year. So as I said, I'd been a Battalion Commander at Plebe Christmas, and Regimental Commander spring break; leader in Buckner and so forth. Volunteered for Operation Crossroads Africa with Reverend Robertson down in New York. I went to New York - excuse me, went to south, went to Africa, went to Uganda, spent the summer there. AOT training in Germany between my Yearling year and Cow year, and then Crossroads Africa between my Cow year and Firstie year. Came back from Crossroads Africa, and was told by my Tactical Officer that because I'd gone on Crossroads and failed to participate in the leadership program, I wouldn't have the opportunity for any leadership experiences at the Academy during my Firstie year.

And I've always believed that was a clear reflection that the institution was not ready for African-Americans in leadership, because nobody had had the experience of being Battalion Commanders, Regimental Commanders, and that kind of thing.

Interviewer

Right. So that was for the positions during the academic year -

Joseph Anderson:

During our Firstie year.

Interviewer:

That's multi-stripe jobs.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly. Exactly.

Joseph Anderson:

Nothing I can do about it, so I went on and did my duties and responsibility as a Sergeant for the entire year, left the Academy, got promoted below the zone to Major, below the zone to Lieutenant Colonel. So I clearly think it was more the institution than my reaching the Peter Principle and topping out in terms of my leadership background and skills.

Interviewer:

Okay. And for some people who might be watching this, our more recent, I remind the Cadets sometimes that every Cadet having three stripes as a minimum as a Firstie is not how it's always been.

Joseph Anderson:

Not at all.

Interviewer:

Not by a long shot.

Joseph Anderson:

Not at all.

Interviewer:

That's an important context to throw in there.

Joseph Anderson:

So that was by far the most difficult and unpleasant experience I had at the institution, and as I said, I was soloist for the Glee Club. All my class knew me, understood what I was able to do and so forth. I had great experiences in Vietnam when they did the Anderson Platoon. I ultimately was selected as one of the Presidents of my class for one of the reunion five years, et cetera. So again, it comes back to the institution, in my view, was not ready.

Interviewer:

Speaking of the institution, what was your relationship like with that TAC that, you know, eventually had to tell you, "Hey, this isn't going to happen because you went on Crossroads Africa Project?"

Joseph Anderson:

It was - there was no relationship other than he was a TAC. I don't think he demonstrated any mal-feelings about, toward me, et cetera. But - and I would presume that leadership decisions are made on a bigger basis than just him making that decision, and so forth. You know, we didn't get performance reviews -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

That were shared with us, like you did later in the service.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

But the decision was the decision.

Interviewer:

So he was the messenger of the decision more so than a -

Joseph Anderson:

And so he was a messenger, and whether it was his decision, which I don't think - it may have been his recommendation - but anyway, the institution bought into the decision, particularly considering the leadership that I had shown both academically and leadership-wise at Buckner and other places. And it was just, again, my sense of frustration that this was what was going to happen to me, and that was the only blip in my career and life, period, actually.

Interviewer:

Ever run into that TAC later?

Joseph Anderson:

No, I did not run into that TAC later.

Interviewer:

Obviously, there's probably more than just one person who went on that Crossroads trip, I imagine.

Joseph Anderson:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Were they affected in similar ways in terms of ineligibility to be a Cadet leader during the academic year?

Joseph Anderson:

There were three of us, myself and two white Cadets, and I don't actually know what their responsibilities were when they came back. Sandy Hallenbeck and Tom Barron were the two individuals, and we may be able to look up and see -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Responsibilities they had. I'd be interested in knowing, if you go back and research that.

Interviewer:

Yeah. It's an interesting question.

Joseph Anderson:

Sandy Hallenbeck and Tom Barron.

Interviewer:

All right. Well, we'll have to look them up and see what they ended up with. We've heard in some previous interviews, and just in some of our research, about small groups of Cadets within the Corps - probably the couple of years older than you, so Upperclassmen when you were Plebe - that made it their business to make sure that blacks did not succeed here. Did you ever run into any of those guys? One, we've heard the name Alabama Gang, in a certain Company, I guess it was, in one specific Company in that

instance?

Joseph Anderson:

I did not have that experience, and/or run into any of those individuals that I'm aware of. The one example of that was that I talked to a member of one of the previous classes that I was here, you know, the classes of '62, '63, and '64 -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And I'm on the For Us All Campaign right now, and so I called this individual and asked him to participate in the Campaign, and he said, "Absolutely not." He said when he was here, he was in the Company where the Ku Klux Klan was registered, and resided - where the Ku Klux Klan resided, and he would never have signed up for and committed to doing anything positively for the Academy. I had no knowledge and no experience of that, and never heard about that since that individual said that to me. Now, he is a class ahead of me, as you can appreciate. He contacted me after his 50th class reunion, and said based on that experience at the 50th class reunion, he had a whole different view and perspective on his class and his peers beyond that experience that he described as a Plebe in that Company.

Interviewer:

So it turned into a positive outlook after the 50th reunion.

Joseph Anderson:

Correct.

Interviewer:

Do you remember what Company he was in, or was he -

Joseph Anderson:

I do not remember what Company he was in. I do remember what class he was in, if you care to know.

Interviewer:

A year ahead of you, right. Year ahead of you, you said; '64.

Joseph Anderson:

I didn't say that, but you're right.

Interviewer:

Oh, okay.

Joseph Anderson:

But you're right.

Interviewer:

Okay. Maybe I inferred.

Joseph Anderson:

You're right - class of '64.

Interviewer:

Okay, '64. So by the time you graduate, summer of '65, obviously, the beginnings of what's going to become an important part of the next chapter in your life is just starting to happen in the spring with the commitment of ground combat troops to Vietnam. How much was that on your radar as a last-semester Firstie getting ready to graduate here?

Joseph Anderson:

I knew it was there, and previous classes - '64 and others - were going to Vietnam. But it was not part of my priority or concern. I chose Infantry Branch. I chose the 82nd Airborne Division. I was successful in getting both of those, so that was all that was on my mind, primarily. I went to Airborne School right after graduation; went to Ranger School right after Airborne School. Ironically, consistently, I turned out to be the leader of my Ranger class, after not being able to be a leader at West Point my senior year.

Interviewer:

So that supports your theory, then -

Joseph Anderson:

Yep.

Interviewer:

That perhaps the institution here wasn't ready -

Joseph Anderson:

Yep.

Interviewer:

Even if Fort Benning was.

Joseph Anderson:

Yep. So I was chosen to lead my Ranger class.

Interviewer:

Chosen by your classmates to lead -

Joseph Anderson:

And by the Staff at the Ranger School.

Interviewer:

Endorsed by the Cadre there?

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer:

That's incredible. Let me ask you a couple more questions before we move past the West Point years, just while I'm thinking about it. When you were a Cadet, was the Cadet Sponsorship Program similar to what our Cadets these days know, in terms of being linked up with a family on post to kind of help you as a family away from home kind of thing, or was that not quite the same?

Joseph Anderson:

It was not there, and specifically there were no African-American Staff or Faculty -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

At the Academy in that '61 to '65 time frame.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And so the NCOs and some of the Administrative people -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Took us under their wings.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

As African-Americans, and made sure that we knew as much as they could share with us as possible. Now, I had another major resource for me was Jim Fowler, class of '67, two years behind me. And Jim Fowler is the first second-generation African-American graduate.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And his dad, graduating in the '40s, and as you can appreciate, was silenced, and feces in the shoes, and all those really ugly things back then -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Helped me and others understand what it took to survive, and compete, and succeed at the

Academy and in the Army. When I graduated in 1965, there were no African-American Generals in the Army.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

I graduated in 1965, there were six full Colonels in the Army. Colonel Fowler was one of those Colonels, and was over at Morehouse - whatâ€™s in Baltimore? Morgan. Morgan.

Interviewer:

Morgan State.

Joseph Anderson:

He was in Morgan State in Baltimore, and so when we would go into Washington, D.C., around Glee Club trips and our other activities, Colonel Fowler, Mrs. Fowler, took me under their wing as my family away from home, along with Jim Fowler, who was class of â€™67.

Interviewer:

Right. Did you ever have any meetings or in that discussion of older, or excuse me, NCOs that were on post, ever talk with any of the old Buffalo Soldiers who were still around in the area after the Buffalo Soldiers had been - what do we call that when we disbanded the unit in the â€™50s, at the end of the Korean War, I think, is when they were officially disbanded? And a lot of them went to other jobs here on post, but I know a lot of them were still in the area.

Joseph Anderson:

We did not. I did not, and Iâ€™m not aware of any of those kind of interactions or discussions going on.

Interviewer:

But youâ€™re talking about NCOs that were working in other things on post -

Joseph Anderson:

Correct.

Interviewer:

But non-teaching roles.

Joseph Anderson:

Correct, and -

Interviewer:

Right, so nobody teaching.

Joseph Anderson:

And Administrative people, and -

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Joseph Anderson:

You know, maybe in the other activities and so forth that Iâ€™m not aware of.

Interviewer:

Right. Okay. So you mentioned, you know, the relationship wasnâ€™t easy among the four of you, based on the geography of the Corps, and the fact that you were dispersed in four different Companies in the two Regiments. What did you see from some of the other minority groups, perhaps? I know thereâ€™s three Asian-Americans in your class that Iâ€™m aware of, and a slightly larger but not much larger number of Hispanics in the class. Did you see any similarities with their experience with your own, or was it not something you paid much attention to?

Joseph Anderson:

Thereâ€™s nothing I observed, paid any attention to.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you mentioned upon graduation, your choice, Infantry, Fort Bragg, you achieved both of those based on your respectable class standing. Did well at Airborne School. I know from doing a little bit of research that a lot of the people in I think your class and the

one after did not necessarily always go to what we would not call the Officer Basic Course right after graduation. In a lot of cases guys went to their unit first, and then came back to those courses as slots allowed, or whatever the case mightâ€™ve been. So what was your path like after graduation in terms of Airborne, Ranger, eventually ending up at Fort Bragg, or what order did that happen in?

Joseph Anderson:

I graduated with a 60 daysâ€™ vacation. Went to the 82nd Airborne before I went to Airborne School.

Interviewer:

Oh, thatâ€™s fun.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. So I was there for a very brief time, getting there I guess in August, and then going off to Airborne School in September.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And then finishing Airborne School and then going directly into Ranger School with the next class that was available after Airborne School, and coming back to the 82nd Airborne as an Airborne Ranger in the Christmas time frame of 1965.

Interviewer:

So you never did go to an Officer Basic course, then.

Joseph Anderson:

I did not, no.

Interviewer:

Okay. And the reading I did on it, it seemed to indicate that the Armyâ€™s belief at the time was, especially among the Infantrymen, as long as you got through Ranger School, that was all you needed to know. That was kind of their justification that I read.

Joseph Anderson:

And I have not, of course, heard any discussion one way or the other about that, but it was not something that was even put in front of us as something to do in that time frame -

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Joseph Anderson:

Of Vietnam. And Iâ€™m sure part of it was they needed as many replacement Officers -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Going to Vietnam. When the units went over in â€™64, â€™65, and they began to lose Lieutenants, they would need individual replacements to show up at that time, so I went to Airborne School, Ranger School, 82nd Airborne, was planning to get married at the time, and then I got orders for Vietnam. I got married three weeks before I went to Vietnam, moved my wedding date up so I could have a little honeymoon, and went off to Vietnam to the First CAV.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, were you guys under the rule at the time that Regular Army Officers had to be stateside for a year before they could go to Vietnam, or that hadnâ€™t happened yet?

Joseph Anderson:

Hadnâ€™t heard of that rule.

Interviewer:

Okay. I think that was later â€™60s. So you said that as a Cadet you were not overly aware of Vietnam in terms of the day to day stuff going on there. Do you think that, looking back at it, you wouldâ€™ve tried to become more aware, or was it not even on the national radar enough that you could have had that awareness here?

Joseph Anderson:

We were aware that it was there.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

But it wasn't like you can count on and you're absolutely guaranteed that everybody who graduates is going to Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Joseph Anderson:

We hadn't elevated to that degree -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

At that time.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And so as an Officer coming out of the Academy, if you had intentions of progression and succession, then you'd know you want to go to combat.

Interviewer:

Correct.

Joseph Anderson:

And - but I had 82nd in my plans, had a wedding in my plans, so was not looking for orders, and they came with a surprise.

Interviewer:

Right. And that's why they're orders and not suggestions, so.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

Now, you said your brother had served as an enlisted man in Korea.

Joseph Anderson:

Correct.

Interviewer:

So almost 20 years prior, by that point. Obviously, I would imagine some of your instructors were Korean War veterans, those kinds of things. Did you get a lot of insights from those guys while you were a Cadet on combat itself, or was it just not discussed as part of whatever they were teaching?

Joseph Anderson:

It was not discussed as part of what they were teaching, you know, in terms of the Captains, Majors, Lieutenant Colonels that were instructors, and so forth. Just not a lot of interaction and reflection about "my experience in Korea" for them -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

As compared to when I came back as an Instructor in '73-'76, we had a lot of experience in the Instructors about Vietnam, and current Instructors have a lot of experience in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

We did not have that same kind of interplay and interaction when we were here as Cadets.

Interviewer:

Okay. I want to ask you about Fayetteville, Fort Bragg, for that I guess probably only about

six months you were there, if I -

Joseph Anderson:

Right.

Interviewer:

Understand the time line correctly. Obviously, North Carolinaâ€™s a little different than either Kansas or your experience as a Cadet here. So what were your impressions of Fayetteville as a Second Lieutenant, brand-new commission?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, it was an Army town, and one that was organized, and supportive of the military, and so forth. In terms of a bachelor Officer, as I was, in BOQ, not a lot of social interaction, as compared to perhaps some of the married Officers that wouldâ€™ve been in Officersâ€™ Quarters and that kind of thing. Single, would go over to Tuskegee and hang out, you know, with some of the folks weâ€™d met when we were here at Fort Benning earlier and so forth. But not a lot of community interaction; just learning to be a Second Lieutenant in charge of a Platoon.

Interviewer:

Yeah; plenty there to do. Was the K.K.K. billboard already on the exit there at Fayetteville? I know of it being there later. I donâ€™t know at what point it was put up, but.

Joseph Anderson:

I was not aware of that.

Interviewer:

Okay. At some point, there was a billboard at the exit for Fort Bragg off of I-95 that was essentially, you know, â€œwelcome to Fayetteville, the North Carolina home of the K.K.K.,â€ or something to that effect.

Joseph Anderson:

Iâ€™m not familiar with or remember that, no.

Interviewer:

Okay. Yeah. So what about within the unit itself? Was race a big deal within the 82nd, or was it more about doing your job and thatâ€™s it?

Joseph Anderson:

My experience was more about doing my job. I know when I showed up with my Platoon, there was an NCO there that had been running the Platoon without an Officer, and his counsel to me was, â€œWelcome, Lieutenant. Iâ€™ve been in charge of the Platoon, and Iâ€™ll keep things going. You just sit back and take it easy.â€ And so we had to have a little discussion about, â€œNo, Iâ€™m here to lead the Platoon, and youâ€™re my Platoon Sergeant. Letâ€™s get that straight right now.â€ No issue beyond that. We just - he was going to test the waters, and I had to respond to his test.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And I took over as Platoon Leader, and away we went.

Interviewer:

So once you passed the test, so to speak -

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

He said, â€œOkay, this guyâ€™s got it.â€

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Joseph Anderson:

He was not going to challenge me about leading the Platoon.

Interviewer:

He gave the opportunity. You took the opportunity. And he said, "Okay, he did the right thing."

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And that's one we still talk about with Cadets. It's your going to get to that Platoon where the guy's been doing it for a long time without you, and if it was left to his choice, he would continue to do so without you.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

But - yeah. So you said you went over to Vietnam at some point in 1966?

Joseph Anderson:

Yes. I was a individual replacement, 4th of July time frame, early July time frame. Actually, early July of '66, individual replacement in the First CAV. Went over to the First Regiment, Airborne slot, 82nd - excuse me, it was the First of the Twelfth Battalion of the First Regiment, which was an Airborne Regiment in the First Cavalry Division - Air Mobile.

Interviewer:

Right. So what was your experience prior to getting to Vietnam with the Air Mobile concept, which was obviously pretty new at the time?

Joseph Anderson:

I had no experience with it. I jumped out of airplanes in Airborne School. Ranger School did not address it, so we went into the First CAV as individual replacements, and what the Air Mobile concept meant is that instead of walking everywhere, we got helicopter movement, and got us from point A to point B. And then we'd walk.

Interviewer:

Right. So just one ride, then you're walking.

Joseph Anderson:

Yes.

Interviewer:

So I think probably one of the things you're most known for, in terms of that tour in Vietnam, that first tour in Vietnam, was The Anderson Platoon, that turned into the movie - won an Oscar and an Emmy, is that correct?

Joseph Anderson:

Correct.

Interviewer:

Okay - for documentary category. How did that come about?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, I arrived in Vietnam in July, and by August, was pretty much in place and leading my Platoon in search and destroy missions and so forth. We were in the field, and got an order to go rescue a Platoon, a Helicopter Platoon, that had landed and gotten ambushed. And so this was afternoon one day, and they said, "Get moving," gave me the location and direction, and so off I went with my Platoon, and it got dark, and I stopped to set up. And they said, "Oh no, you have to keep moving," which was, you know, unheard of, that you'd move at night -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

In the jungle - but I followed my orders. Got the folks saddled up and away we went, and we came upon the location that they told us were there, and ran into a Vietcong Battalion, and the fight was on, and they had us surrounded. Had my Platoon surrounded, and so all the training that I had been exposed to kicked in. And so in the midst of that discussion and fight, I was calling in Artillery, calling in aircraft, calling in Smoky Overhead with flares,

everything I could do to keep them at bay, and we were successful in that. And I had one individual hit with a bullet, grazed in the hip, but we fought all night, and were just about out of ammunition. Told my Platoon to fix bayonets, and daylight came, and they were driven off. And then we found the Platoon.

There had been some 20 guys landed there. We found four of them alive, and took them out and then went back into Base Camp. And so back in Base Camp, about this time showed up this crew from France that were here to do the Vietnam Experience for themselves, for French, like French Public Television -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

As they had been in Vietnam in the Indochina War.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And it was a crew of three; a gentleman named Pierre Schoendoerffer was the Director, and he had a sound man and a cameraman. And they were assigned to my Platoon, and I'm not too excited about that, not knowing who they were and what they were going to do to get us in trouble. But it turned out that that was just the opposite; they were very well experienced in difficult and challenging circumstances, and did everything they could to fit in and not get in the way, but just filmed everything we did for six weeks, day and night. As a matter of fact, I became friends with him, visited him several times in France. He came back to the U.S. on several occasions, did a second documentary, which most people have not seen. But was with us, and left for France after six weeks, and I thought that was the end of it.

And then February of 1967, he came out with a documentary called La section Anderson, The Anderson Platoon in French.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And it just took the country by storm in France. They showed it again two, three weeks later, which was unprecedented. CBS bought the rights to it, and asked him to come to New York City and do an English version of the documentary, which he did, and it became The Anderson Platoon. It was shown on the 4th of July, 1967. I was asked - I was asked and allowed to go home a week early, so that I could be in the United States for the showing, which didn't bother me at all. And so I flew home, and was in my home in Topeka, Kansas, with my parents, and my wife at the time, and the media, and all that, when it was shown on television on July 4, 1967. It took the country by storm, same thing, like Roots. It was shown again three weeks later; very, very successful. A movie company, Pathé Productions, picked it up, and wanted to make it into a movie documentary beyond the TV documentary.

And it began to be shown around the country in kind of the artsy playhouses, you know, in New York City, Colorado, et cetera, et cetera. And so it wound up being, wound up winning both an Oscar and an Emmy for the best foreign documentary of 1967.

Interviewer:

Now, I assume - a lot of questions come out of that, but I -

Joseph Anderson:

All right.

Interviewer:

First of all, I assume that this is early enough in the large war, for lack of a better term, that this was new to most Americans - to see this on the screen, whether it was the television or the movie screen. To see the up-close combat, that kind of thing.

Joseph Anderson:

That's absolutely correct, because it showed in an hour what our various experiences

were, and it showed the fact that unlike the later films, youâ€™re not fighting every minute in that hour.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Thereâ€™s a lot of boredom, a lot of walking the jungle, and looking for things and not finding anything, and then there can be some very intense fire fights.

Interviewer:

Yep.

Joseph Anderson:

And he filmed that, with his crew, was in the middle of that, and they stayed out of the way but stayed safe, and we kept ourselves safe, and it went very well.

Interviewer:

So what did Topeka, Kansas, think of their hometown hero now on screen?

Joseph Anderson:

It was a big deal. It was a big deal. The newspapers were around. Jet, Ebony Magazine, and others picked it up and so forth, so it was quite a high-profile experience for me, personally.

Interviewer:

Yeah - still a, well, probably First Lieutenant by then?

Joseph Anderson:

Yes.

Interviewer:

So probably not the normal experience for a First Lieutenant Platoon Leader in Vietnam, even at that time.

Joseph Anderson:

Thatâ€™s exactly right, and so you know, I got a lot of recognition from my home town, and itâ€™s followed me through my career of the 13 years I was on Active Duty after graduation. And itâ€™s been a measure of success, and I think opened doors and created opportunities for me in the military that I might not have had otherwise.

Interviewer:

So you got the idea, certainly over the rest of your military career, that people recognized Joe Anderson, the name, when you arrived to a new duty station, that kind of thing?

Joseph Anderson:

Not in particular, but it didnâ€™t take long.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Joseph Anderson:

You know? For example, after that tour in Vietnam I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, as a Company Commander at an Advanced Infantry Training program, training troops to go back to Vietnam and so forth. And so I was doing that, and you know, performing as I like to do, and very successful, but was identified and selected to be the Aide-de-camp for the Commanding General at Fort Dix. And so that was another one of those first experiences for me, where I was I think the first African-American Aide-de-camp in the United States Army, in that 1967-â€˜68 time frame, to a gentleman, K.W. Collins, who was the Commanding General at Fort Dix.

Interviewer:

Now, what was the feeling on the part of your Platoon, do you think, about having this film crew along?

Joseph Anderson:

Well again, initially apprehension in terms of what is going to happen to us, but as they continued to be well-disciplined, and full of interesting stories, they became a positive morale factor for the Platoon. And when Pierre and his crew would go back to get their

batteries recharged, to get more film, they were missed by the Platoon. And they would come back out, and weâ€™d here more of their activities around the world, and harrowing experiences - not necessarily combat, per se -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

When they chose to go to Saigon with Reese, my radio operator, to film an R&R experience for him, that was quite an event.

Interviewer:

Different kind of harrowing, huh?

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

Right. So about the Platoon, what did your Platoon look like in terms of their makeup? I assume mostly draftees, or?

Joseph Anderson:

Yes and no, in that the enlisted men, the Privates, Specialists, were mostly draftees. The NCOs were career -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

Soldiers - unlike my second tour. And so they were E6s and E7s that had been in Europe and other places, and knew their way around the Infantry, and how to perform, and so forth. And in that era, we were looking for and wanting to engage -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

With the enemy, and were very aggressive about that, to not our peril, but in terms of our efforts to accomplish the mission - search and destroy.

Interviewer:

Gotcha. So weâ€™ll get to the second tour in just a minute, â€™cause as you mentioned, thereâ€™s a definite shift over that time.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

But in the first tour, in that group, what did you think your average soldierâ€™s thought of having a black Platoon Leader in a time when that was most likely a rare occurrence?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, I think that was part of the selection process for Pierre, and that I was an African-American West Point graduate, which was very unusual.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

I did take French at the Academy, so they thought that would be helpful; they -

Interviewer:

According to The Howitzer, you -

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Were in French Club, even.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. But it did not make a difference in that they spoke very good English.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Joseph Anderson:

The Platoon, once we were in that first combat, and I handled it, and they got out of it alive, and understood that I knew how to respond under pressure and under fire, then the leadership stature that I needed to have them follow me was well-established.

Interviewer:

What was the Platoon Sergeant like there; anything like the guy you described at Fort Bragg?

Joseph Anderson:

No. No. The Platoon Sergeant there was I think from Missouri and so forth; a gentleman that I liked and respected. Handled himself very well, followed my leadership, and as you look in the documentary and watch it, you know, he refers to me in the field as "sir," never by first name, and my soldiers did the same thing. And so I was very comfortable with them, had a good relationship with them, but I was the Officer.

Interviewer:

Right. You were the boss. Don't push it.

Joseph Anderson:

And they valued that leadership from me, but did not cross the line to expect anything more than me to be the Officer, Leader of the Platoon.

Interviewer:

Taking yourself out of it for a second, how do you think they dealt with each other? What was your observations of their dealings with each other along either racial lines, or different parts of home towns -

Joseph Anderson:

Very, very diverse group in the Platoon in that there were whites, and from all over the country. There were Hispanic members. There were Native American members. My NCOs, a couple of them were African-American. My Platoon Sergeant was white, et cetera. So very, very diverse profile for the organization; just no issues at all in terms of about race, in terms of my experience and observation. Not even, you know, jokes that were racially tinted and all that kind of stuff. Folks got along very well.

Interviewer:

Yeah. You mentioned -

Joseph Anderson:

And that continued for years after we left the service, when we would have a reunion some 20 years later with Pierre, and those relationships were still very solid.

Interviewer:

You mentioned your RTO. I know just from watching parts of the film, they point out that he's the white Private First Class, I believe, Reese, from South Carolina.

Joseph Anderson:

Right.

Interviewer:

I would imagine if he told people back home in South Carolina that he was working for an African-American Lieutenant, he might've gotten an interesting reaction from some of the home town in that time frame.

Joseph Anderson:

He might have, but it just absolutely did not show.

Interviewer:

That's great. You mentioned going to Fort Dix after the first tour in Vietnam and before the second one. So what were some of the things that you tried to impart to people going to Vietnam, I assume for their first time, based on your experiences there in that first year as a Platoon Leader?

Joseph Anderson:

As a Platoon Leader of a Training Company, these were Privates that were trying to learn the basics of Advanced Infantry Training. They'd been through Basic Training.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And now they were in Advanced Infantry Training as a Branch, and it was nothing more important than helping them learn the skills. So that was my focus and experience. It was not at all about, "Here's what should be your attitude, and what should be your thinking." As a leader now, many years later, I would perceive that that would be of value, but that's not the way we approached it then. We wanted to make sure that they could fire their weapons, they could clean their weapons, they could march properly, they could do the basics of what goes on in Advanced Infantry Training, and we're not dealing with any feelings and/or psychological dimension, et cetera, et cetera.

Interviewer:

Right. So I assume at Fort Dix - I'm imagining the topography of New Jersey has not changed - it's not exactly the same environment as Vietnam - jungle vs. pine trees.

Joseph Anderson:

Not at all.

Interviewer:

So you've got rifle marksmanship; you can do any number of things there. But you can't do anything along the lines of trying to teach them how to fight in the jungle.

Joseph Anderson:

That did not occur at all in terms of jungle training and tactics and so forth.

Interviewer:

Right. And most of these were draftees who, like you said, had been to Basic Training. They get back on the bus, come to you for X period of time with the expectation -

Joseph Anderson:

From a variety of locations around the country, yes.

Interviewer:

And then their expectation, or they know they're going to Vietnam -

Joseph Anderson:

Yes.

Interviewer:

On the way out of New Jersey.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

And look, there's an airport right next door.

Joseph Anderson:

Right. Right.

Interviewer:

Wow. That's quite an experience there. So you went back to - I keep saying Korea, excuse me. You went back to Vietnam in 1970, is it?

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. So I spent two years at Fort Dix, Company Commander, Advanced Infantry Training, and then a second portion of my tour there as the Aide-de-camp to the Commanding General, which was very much a rewarding and challenging experience and I learned a lot about leadership and so forth. And you know one of the things that we evolved to is we'd get out in among the Training Battalions and so forth, and see what observations and activities were going on there. And one of the lessons that I learned that stayed with me the rest of my career is every time you leave the office and your desk, you will learn something that you would not have experienced if you'd stayed in your office and at your desk. And so traveling with the General in a car, around to the various Training locations, getting out, talking to the Company Commanders, to the Leaders, Battalion Commanders, that two-star General had a better feel for what was going on than if he'd stayed at his desk.

And then there was another whole dimension for a young Officer being in that situation, because he entertained a lot, and so getting exposed to how it is that a General Officer and other Officers interact at his personal quarters was significant. He made it his business to go out and play golf, and so he said, "All right, Lieutenant - Captain, I play golf every Wednesday afternoon and every Saturday morning, and you have the choice of learning to play golf, or staying in the office and answering the phone." And so it was an easy decision -

Interviewer:

Easy choice, yes sir.

Joseph Anderson:

And I learned to play golf in 1967 at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and it stayed with me all of my career.

Interviewer:

As an Aide, I know - I've never been one, but I've worked with a lot of them - and I know there's a fine art as an Aide to telling too much and not telling too much, and knowing how and which people you can tell, "Hey, the boss might be interested in this," or "He doesn't like that." How much of that kind of experiences did you have with General Collins, trying to shape his day, or shape what things got through to him or didn't get through to him? How much experience did you have in that arena?

Joseph Anderson:

You know, it was particularly significant for the Senior Officers - the Colonels on post and so forth - to have comfort with me as his Aide, that they had access to me, to be able to share things with me, and have me help them get things accomplished that they needed to. The General's office included a Secretary, myself, an E6 Sergeant, and himself. And then at home, he had a staff - a cook and so forth - with his wife, so that was his inner circle. And then the Officers, and if there were local Dignitaries that came on post, et cetera, he would interact with them appropriately and accordingly. And I would certainly be able to observe and benefit from watching how he did that.

And as Colonels and others interacted with him, some with some success and others without, you know, it was all still a learning experience for me, observing how he interacted with his subordinates.

Interviewer:

So did that job lead directly to your next job in Vietnam, or was that something where the General helped the next step along based on -

Joseph Anderson:

No. I went from Fort Dix to the Infantry Officers Advanced Course at Fort Benning.

Interviewer:

Ah - I missed something.

Joseph Anderson:

And so this was an opportunity for me to go and learn the roles and responsibilities of a Company Commander and/or a Staff Officer for a year. So I left Fort Dix, went to the Infantry Officers Advanced Course, and then received my orders for Vietnam, a second tour. My orders were to go over as an Advisor to the Vietnamese Army on my second tour, and I said, "Absolutely no way do I want to do that." So my - the benefit of The Anderson Platoon and visibility and so forth is I was able to ask for and get assistance in not going back to Vietnam as an Advisor, but to going back to the First CAV.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And so I pulled enough strings, and had access to the people to do that, that gave me a second CAV tour as opposed to an Advisor's tour, which I was very pleased about.

Interviewer:

Now, I understand exactly what you're saying, and I'm going to ask this next

question just so I can use it in class next year. Can you tell us a little bit about the down side - perceived, real, or otherwise - at the time of going to Vietnam in 1970 as an Advisor, vs. going back to a combat unit like First CAV?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, number one, as an individual, as a Company Commander leading other American soldiers, as opposed to advising Vietnamese, the difference between the two is dramatic in that I am in charge of a Company.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And by the way, that Company was in Cambodia, not Vietnam, so my second tour, we went into Cambodia.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Joseph Anderson:

We went into the middle of the Cambodia Campaign -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Et cetera. And so it was my perception that I would be better served leading American troops, and safer leading American troops, than being an Advisor to the Vietnamese, whom I didnâ€™t have disrespect for, but certainly valued American soldiers more than Vietnamese soldiers.

Interviewer:

What do you think the average American - not Officers, but the soldiers that you led - if you had told them, â€œHey, tomorrow weâ€™re going to do something with a Vietnamese unit,â€ what do you think the average American soldierâ€™s views of the Vietnamese Army was at that time?

Joseph Anderson:

We didnâ€™t have a lot of knowledge, because we were in the jungle, in both instances, both tours, and never had any joint operations -

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Joseph Anderson:

With the Vietnamese Army - yeah. Iâ€™m sure our perception wouldâ€™ve been they were not nearly as qualified, skilled, and capable as going to work with another American unit, another Battalion in the First CAV, or another organization, whether it was the 173rd, or 101st, or whatever the case may be.

Interviewer:

Makes sense. What about the effect - by 1970, obviously, the anti-war movement at home is in full swing; mightâ€™ve even crested by then.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

How did that affect the soldiers that you had in the field in 1970 vs. the ones you had in your first tour?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, it was just a complete reversal of my experience first tour to second tour. First tour, I was the newbie and the rookie, and didnâ€™t know anything about what was going on. Second tour, my NCOs had all been in the service three or four years, as opposed to 14 or 16 years, like my first tour.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

My period of five yearsâ€™ service was probably the most senior person in the Platoon - Company - first most senior person in the Company.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

The Platoon Sergeants, NCOs, and so forth, had three or four yearsâ€™ service. The enlisted men were draftees that wanted no part of being there, as opposed to the Airborne troops that were there on my first tour and so forth. And the first tour was about looking for a fight to search and destroy. The second tour was about getting home safely.

Interviewer:

So risk avoidance.

Joseph Anderson:

And so when we got into a fight, we fought hard and fought well. But if you got up in the morning and say, â€œDo I want to get into a big contact and a fight, or do I want to get to the evening without one?â€ the choice was the latter.

Interviewer:

Interesting. What about the - was there differences in the racial attitudes? You said in the first tour, no issues in your Platoon once they understood that you were the Leader, you could do what it took to get them home safely. Did you see a difference in attitudes at all in that second tour in that respect?

Joseph Anderson:

The racial issues were nonexistent. The one issue, first tour and second tour, that I share with folks was a major source of tension, of all things, was the music - in that the brothers in Base Camp wanted their music.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And they didnâ€™t want anything to do with hillbilly and/or country and blues and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer:

Right. They wanted Motown.

Joseph Anderson:

And vice versa.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so if there was going to be some tension around having a few beers, it was going to be about â€œWhat music are we going to listen to?â€

Interviewer:

So this is the Platoon or the Squad in a tent. Both people want to play their music loudly.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

Young people like to do.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So you mentioned Base Camp, though, and obviously theyâ€™re not, in 1970 or â€™66, carrying large stereos to the field like -

Joseph Anderson:

Right.

Interviewer:

These guys do these days - small stereos to the field - but was there other differences that

you detected between Base Camp vs. out on a Firebase or on patrol, just because they did have time on their hands to have these issues?

Joseph Anderson:

And there were not significant racial differences. If you said, "Well, who would pick up the dice and start a crap game?" it would probably be the African-American individuals in the Platoon, but the white guys would jump right in the middle of the game, as was evidenced in the documentary -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so forth. And so there were tendencies and inclinations that go with the culture and history of being black vs. white in America.

Interviewer:

What about you said in 1970 the desire waking up in the morning to go find a fight was completely not there as it was in '66 and 7. What do you think the soldiers' perception of the chances of success in Vietnam were in 1970? Obviously, we're a little bit before the announcement of, "Hey, we're getting out of here on a timetable," but what was the perception of, "Hey, we can still do something here and win here," in 1970?

Joseph Anderson:

In the '70-'71 time frame, the attitude remained the same. If we got in a fight, we're going to do what we need to do to win the fight, and that was evidenced mostly by the Cambodia experience. And so when I landed in Vietnam in '70, I went right into Cambodia and took over a Company in Cambodia, and so we were midway through that 60-day incursion.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

I often say to people, "That was the best tactical move ever undertaken by the United States Army," in that we entered into Cambodia. They were like assuming that we were not going to go across their road from one side to the other, and so weapons, and rice, and ammunition, and so forth, food, was buried everywhere over there, and they fought like crazy to protect it.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

So that was some of the most intense combat that I had in both tours was in Cambodia, because they were fighting to protect their matériel. We fought in those 30 days, a real test of my leadership. I had one instance I sent a Squad out to clear the path before we started our movement that day, and they got ambushed; lost three people that day right there. We couldn't get back to them; and we fought for two days, and finally ran them off, ran the Vietcong off. By that time, the bodies had started to deteriorate, and my Platoon troops could not go get them, so I had to go personally bag up those bodies, because it was too distressful, too stressful for the individual Platoon members, and so forth.

And so it was those kind of circumstances that made that a particularly unique circumstance. But what made it so successful is when we fought for those 60 days - 30 days with me as a Company Commander - from the time we came out of Cambodia in August - whatever the month was - from that time for the rest of my tour as a Company Commander, we never received another shot.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Joseph Anderson:

We'd taken away their ability to fight. So all their food, weapons, ammunition, et cetera, had been taken, and they had no capacity. In fact, we perceive that they were following us

around on our search and destroy missions, eating our leftover C-rations.

Interviewer:

The scraps.

Joseph Anderson:

Yes. And so I say again, that was one of the most successful efforts experienced tactically, but politically, it cost the President his job.

Interviewer:

That, among other things. So -

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. And so - and then lastly, General Davison, Michael Davison, who had been the Commandant when I was here, knew I was in action there, knew me from The Anderson Platoon, flew in his helicopter to see me, and said, "Hey Joe, I just wanted to let you know you did a great job, blah blah blah blah." And so that rapport and relationship from a General here as a Cadet to a four-star General in combat was very, very significant and emotional.

Interviewer:

Now, it seems like the never taking another shot is another of those two-sided swords, right, in terms of if you don't take a lot of shots, what are your soldiers doing, and how does that help or not help their skills?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, having been in those experiences in Cambodia, they never let their guard down.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And it was my job to make sure they did not let their guard down, and so we set up our perimeters, and did all the defensive things that we needed to do. But at the same time, it was very clear that the fight had been taken away and taken out of the enemy.

Interviewer:

Right. There's not much there anymore.

Joseph Anderson:

No.

Interviewer:

Now, at this same time, I know you said you took some casualties, obviously. What was it like when a new guy showed up to this Company that has already been through the tough part of what you described in Cambodia, and how did you keep the new guys from falling into the trap of, "Oh, this is no big deal?"

Joseph Anderson:

Their peers made sure that they knew that we had to be diligent, and keep our defenses and guards up every single day and every single night.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And so my NCOs understood it. The enlisted people who had been there understood it, because they'd been through that already -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And were very careful not to let new replacements let their guard down and endanger them.

Interviewer:

Right. So if you screw up, the team is vulnerable -

Joseph Anderson:

Yes.

Interviewer:

So weâ€™ll make sure you donâ€™t screw up.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

Because itâ€™s our butt.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

And thereâ€™s some logic to that, certainly.

Joseph Anderson:

And so I had that experience, was a Company Commander, and then lo and behold, the Commanding General of the First CAV asked me to be his Aide-de-camp. And so I was Aide-de-camp a second time, before any other African-Americans have been an Aide-de-camp the first time.

Interviewer:

Who was that Commander at the time?

Joseph Anderson:

George Putnam.

Interviewer:

Oh, okay.

Joseph Anderson:

George Putnam was the Commanding General of the First CAV, and brought the Colors home -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

In April of 1971.

Interviewer:

Huh. You mentioned that the soldiers policed themselves and the new guys as they came in.

Joseph Anderson:

And beyond that, policing their discipline, they also policed themselves in both experiences relative to drugs and alcohol.

Interviewer:

Okay, yeah.

Joseph Anderson:

The troops could have drugs or alcohol, if they were into that, in Base Camp, and thereâ€™s several kinds of Base Camps. There would be a Platoon or Company going in to secure the Artillery that was still out on the field -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And then there would be going all the way back to Base Camp, where you had hot showers, and a PX, and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer:

Right - sidewalks and that kind of stuff.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly. Exactly, boarded-up sidewalks.

Interviewer:

The wood sidewalks.

Joseph Anderson:

And Sin City.

Interviewer:

Right. So - and from your perception, at least your experience of it, didn't have a problem in that regard.

Joseph Anderson:

Never had a problem in the field -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

With drugs or alcohol or racial tension and so forth. Bullets cannot tell the difference.

Interviewer:

Right. And that's a similar theme that we've heard from other Company-level Leaders, certainly -

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

In the Vietnam War. Did you perceive a problem in the Base Camps at all, or never enough to -

Joseph Anderson:

No, nothing that endangered the Platoon and/or an individual's ability to be ready to go back out.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

After we did our tour of duty around the Artillery and/or in the very Base Camp in An Khe, which was the Home Base of the First CAV, et cetera.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, you said over time you get no contact over several months. Based on your earlier experience, for example, was there ever a time where you think, "Okay, it's been a while now. Surely they must be building back up to something. It's coming soon. It's coming soon," and it never did. But was that a feeling on your part, or?

Joseph Anderson:

No, there was not a sense that things were so quiet, and that there must be something going to happen. The perception that the movies that you see in the theater, the movie Platoon and so forth, that there's a lot of conflict, a lot of action, is not the case at all. And in many instances, there may be a firefight -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

That lasts ten minutes. We bump into them, they bump into us, everybody's shooting, they're gone. On the other hand, that first instance when we went in to get the ambushed Platoon, that was an all-night fight. And another instance around the documentary The Anderson Platoon, a couple of helicopters had been shot at, and we were on our way to another location. We got diverted to where the helicopters were shot at, and I'm sure some Vietnamese General said, "Why the hell did you do that?" Because here came the First CAV.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And we landed on them with all that we had, and fought for two days there. Lost some people - I didn't, but other Platoons did. Captured a lot of them, wiped out their ammunition and weapons and so forth.

Interviewer:

On the weapons note, just a stray thought I had. Were you carrying M16s on both of those tours, or was the first tour still with the M14?

Joseph Anderson:

M16 both tours.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And one of the things that I tell people that is absolutely mind-blowing, whenever I make a speech about leadership: in my two years in combat, I never fired my weapon.

Interviewer:

That is kind of mind-blowing.

Joseph Anderson:

What does that mean? That is the point. And then I go on to say, "I'm not shooting my weapon."

Interviewer:

Something's wrong.

Joseph Anderson:

"I'm not shooting."

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

They're inside the perimeter. So the last thing you want is the Company Commander or the Platoon Leader having to defend himself and/or the Platoon or the Company.

Interviewer:

So when you're not firing your weapon, if you're not thinking in terms of, "Hey, I have to get to this point to fire this direction or that direction."

Joseph Anderson:

"I'm calling in Artillery."

Interviewer:

You are free to duty.

Joseph Anderson:

"I'm positioning the Squads. I am making sure aircraft are overhead."

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Spookies giving us flares at night. I'm doing all the things that a Leader should be doing.

Interviewer:

That you can't do if you're shooting.

Joseph Anderson:

The last thing a Platoon Leader or a Company Commander should be doing is firing his weapon.

Interviewer:

That makes really good sense.

Joseph Anderson:

I have no Purple Hearts. I have no Purple Hearts. Multiple Awards of Valor - Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, Commendation Medals -

Joseph Anderson:

You got a bunch of other stuff.

Joseph Anderson:

No Purple Heart, because I never was in a position that we were penetrated, and I had to fire. Or was in a position to be shot. And that's always, always mind-blowing to people.

Interviewer:

Add me to the list.

Joseph Anderson:

Okay.

Interviewer:

Now, you mentioned the other awards. Obviously, nobody goes out and says, "Boy, I want to go earn a Silver Star today," but I think two Silver Stars in two different tours stands you ahead of the crowd, certainly.

Joseph Anderson:

I had seven Awards for Valor.

Interviewer:

That's incredible.

Joseph Anderson:

Yep.

Interviewer:

And I think that says as much about what we just talked about, in terms of the calm, the cool, doing the things that you need to do as a Leader, as much as anything else. And that's -

Joseph Anderson:

And it applies and carries forward. You know when I left the Army and went into General Motors, when the union and I would be at it, I said, "Guys, you're not even shooting real bullets." When I'm with my wife on occasion, "Honey, it's not a big thing."

Interviewer:

Now, there might be some people shooting real bullets in Detroit, but that's a different problem, so.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

Let me ask you this, sir. I know you said you get called to be the Aide again, and obviously I assume you did another great job at that. How did the opportunity to come back to West Point open up for you, in terms of coming back here to teach eventually?

Joseph Anderson:

I had always been in interaction with the Social Sciences Department, and had the desire and their expectations that I would come back and teach Problems of Developing Nations.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

The Third World Politics course.

Interviewer:

Now, is this based on Crossroads Africa from way back in the summer of '64 that this started, this relationship?

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly. Because the Social Sciences Department sponsored -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Crossroads Africa -

Interviewer:

Still do.

Joseph Anderson:

And so the interaction with the Staff and Faculty in the Social Sciences Department, and my interest in that part of the world, was clearly something that I wanted to do, and they wanted me to do. And I certainly wanted the graduate program and so forth. So when I finished my second tour, and had the opportunity to go directly to graduate school, I went to UCLA -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Which has a very strong program in African Area Studies. Having been around the block a little bit, and had the experience that I did here at West Point in my Firstie year, I said, "I don't want to just get a degree in African Area Studies, because I don't want anybody in the Army to ever say to me, "Well, we wish we could send him to Europe."

Interviewer:

But he's got a degree on Africa.

Joseph Anderson:

"But he's only - but he only knows Africa." So I got two master's degrees in the time they sent me to get one. I got a degree in Comparative Government -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And then I got a degree in African Studies. And as it turns out, with that amount of classroom work in two years, I was just a couple of classes short of having enough academic work for a PhD in Political Science. So I came back to the Academy, taught in the Social Sciences Department, went up to Columbia University to take a number of classes to get my PhD in African Area Studies from UCLA.

Interviewer:

Now, it's interesting, couple things that jumped out at me in that short snip there. Number one, boy, I don't want them to say, "He can't go to Europe because he's got a degree only in African Studies." Is that a testament to the importance of Europe to the Army in the very end of the Vietnam years, and as it's coming post-Vietnam, everything's back about the Soviets again, or -

Joseph Anderson:

It's more a testament to the black experience in America and in the Army.

Interviewer:

Okay. All right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so I do not want anybody in the Pentagon to say, "This African-American guy only knows Africa."

Interviewer:

Got it.

Joseph Anderson:

"And we're not sending a lot of people to leadership positions in Europe, anyway. So even though he has a stellar career, we better send him somewhere else."

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

African-American experience in America and the Army.

Interviewer:

That's very insightful. Second question. In your Cadet time, obviously we didn't have the academic majors that we have now. If you hadn't done Crossroads Africa as a rising Firstie, do you think you would've had the same opportunity to develop a relationship with the Faculty in any Department the way you did through that program? Or did that not exist for most Cadets, based on the fact that we were telling you what to take, in most cases?

Joseph Anderson:

I don't think I would - there was no other Department or area that I had the affinity for -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

As compared to the Social Sciences Department. I had good grades; you know, some better than others. But the Social Sciences, the Political Sciences, the Histories and so forth, those were things that I was more comfortable with than the Engineering Programs.

Interviewer:

I understand completely.

Joseph Anderson:

Yep.

Interviewer:

So Vietnam to Los Angeles. That's got to be another huge culture jump.

Interviewer:

Well, and interestingly enough, The Anderson Platoon was a bridge to so many things, both coming home from my first tour, and then coming home from my second tour. Now, you would think, you know, post-Vietnam, anti-war, et cetera, but my ability to share my experience as an Active Duty Officer in classroom - not in uniform, of course, but in civilian clothes, in the classroom. What is this all about? Well, let me show you. And so I could show The Anderson Platoon, and then I don't know how many times, 20 or 30 times that I showed it in two years, I never had a negative experience.

Interviewer:

Interesting. Interesting.

Joseph Anderson:

Because it was so well-done.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

It didn't take a political position. It showed what your uncle, aunts, brothers, and sisters - mostly brothers - were doing in combat, in Vietnam, as a result of the draft.

Interviewer:

Interesting. So you know, this would've been a '72 time frame, by the time you get to -

Joseph Anderson:

'71-'73.

Interviewer:

Okay, yeah, at UCLA.

Joseph Anderson:

The two years at UCLA, and then coming to Soc in '73-'76.

Interviewer:

Right. So post-Watts time frame in L.A.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

In terms of the riots and stuff -

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Which was the end of the '60s, so.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

What kind of a difference did you see just with California in general? Again, completely different area of the country than any of the ones you've been in before. How was California different?

Joseph Anderson:

One thing is that California was very familiar to me, in that my father worked for the Santa Fe Railroad.

Interviewer:

Ah - that was -

Joseph Anderson:

And his family was in Orange County in California.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And so every year of my life prior to going to West Point, weâ€™d get on the train and drive two and a half days - ride two and a half days - with a box lunch, sitting up, â€™cause he wasnâ€™t going to be in a recliner cabin and so forth. And weâ€™d get off the train, and spend three weeks in California with his family, Orange County, Santa Ana.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

Get back on the train and go back. So California was very, very comfortable.

Interviewer:

So it was familiar.

Joseph Anderson:

Very familiar and very comfortable. And so UCLA was a choice, because of the Southern California orientation.

Interviewer:

Okay; now itâ€™s all making sense.

Joseph Anderson:

I have a home in San Diego now, because of the Southern California orientation.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Joseph Anderson:

So I knew Orange County. Even though I didnâ€™t know about the Birch Society as a kid growing up in Orange County, I knew about Orange County more than I knew about North Topeka.

Interviewer:

Gotcha. Now, you mention The Anderson Platoon as a way to show people Vietnam, and say, â€™Hey, this is what is going on on the ground. This is what soldiers experience.â€™ In terms of talking to other students, that makes great sense. What kind of reactions did you get from the faculty at UCLA in those two years?

Joseph Anderson:

No different. No different between the faculty and/or the students. And so again, the documentary is about them. Itâ€™s about their own relationships and friends, draftees.

Interviewer:

Right; they knew men.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly, and it did not take a political position.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

It says, â€™This is the American experience in Vietnam,â€™ period.

Interviewer:

Observation, not values judgment.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Joseph Anderson:

And so if you had a reaction to that, itâ€™s your reaction; but it has nothing to do with what

was going on with your brother, or your uncle, and/or other folks that were drafted and went to war.

Interviewer:

Was there still any residual anti-war stuff going on on the campus at that point, or had it kind of died out with the -

Joseph Anderson:

In terms of active, no.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

Did any people have feelings and sentiments? I presume so, because the war was just ending, you know, in '73-'74.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And I was there '71-'73.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you get back to West Point in '73, so eight years after graduation. What'd you think coming back in the gate the first time? Was it that same feeling of, "Oh boy, here we go?"

Joseph Anderson:

No, not really, you know. Again, it was Social Science Department, and one thing that was unique about my experience, both at Fort Dix and at West Point, speaking of the anti-war sentiment in the country, is I was not exposed to that. So when I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, I was living in quarters, and the person to my left, the person to my right, the person across the street, were fellow Officers that had been to Vietnam or were going to Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Or both.

Joseph Anderson:

So no reaction.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

No negative reaction.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

When I came to West Point, and I showed Rochelle Tillman Place, and I said, "We could be there as Officers, as a Junior Officer, or we could be in our home," which she's remodeling now. She said, "I'll take our home." But the point is, across the street and left and right were people who felt and had done the same thing that I had experienced in Vietnam.

Interviewer:

The common experience.

Joseph Anderson:

The common experience, the acceptance of that.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

So when people ask me, "Well, have you had bad dreams, bad feelings, and so forth?" both the combination of The Anderson Platoon and being in an accepting environment - and I guess my personality or whatever - never, ever an issue.

Interviewer:

Okay. That's a good thing.

Joseph Anderson:

Never, ever an issue.

Interviewer:

Now, you said, going back our eight years, when you left here as a Cadet, no African-Americans teaching.

Joseph Anderson:

Right.

Interviewer:

Staff, yes. NCOs. But no Officers teaching courses. So by the time you get back, what did the number look like when you joined that group?

Joseph Anderson:

There were a few. I would imagine half a dozen or so teaching. But again, very few.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And there were others in TACs and Administrative positions, Admissions and so forth.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so we formed BOAWP.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

Are you familiar with BOAWP?

Interviewer:

I am, yes.

Joseph Anderson:

Black Officers at West Point.

Interviewer:

Right. Got to have an acronym if it's an Army thing, right?

Joseph Anderson:

You got it. You got it. And so we would have parties, and we would play golf, and you know, do our thing up at the ski lodge, and all that kind of stuff. Not in confrontation or opposition to the institution, but in terms of a networking and support system for ourselves.

Interviewer:

Right. I remember the annual picnic at Round Pond -

Joseph Anderson:

Right.

Interviewer:

As a kid, that's the one I remember all the time, but.

Joseph Anderson:

Right.

Interviewer:

And I know obviously that group started to grow, as -

Joseph Anderson:

And the more and more Officers came on the Staff and Faculty.

Interviewer:

Right, as more Officers, and in some cases I think there was probably some Departments that were actively recruiting African-Americans, and in others, it was kind of just happening. But on the Cadet side, what was your view of the Corps when you got back in '73? So that would've been class of '74 as Firsties at that point.

Joseph Anderson:

Right.

Interviewer:

What was your view of the Cadets, and how much maybe the Corps had changed in the eight years since your graduation?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, a couple of things were going on. When I was here '73 to '76, that was the period of the beginning of the transition of the first women.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

That arrived in '76.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

As I was leaving.

Interviewer:

Summer of '76, as you were leaving, right?

Joseph Anderson:

Yes, as I was leaving, so that was a major topic of discussion.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

That probably overpowered and overwhelmed the issue of race.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. And in terms of the Corps of Cadets, and Cadets in leadership position, that was something that we were interested in, anxious about, concerned about, tried to promote. There were a couple of Senior African-American Officers in leadership positions in the Tactical Department. No Department Heads, of course, et cetera.

Interviewer:

Colonel Robinson, one of the RCOs, Regimental Commanders, in those days.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. Exactly.

Interviewer:

Right? Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

But certainly not had a first Commandant or anything like that until Fred Gordon came back.

Interviewer:

Right. So looking at it, it's interesting that you said that the topic of women had kind of overwhelmed the topic of race. Is that among the Cadets, the Faculty, or both, do you think?

Joseph Anderson:

It was certainly a topic of discussion among the faculty administration, you know. "How are we going to manage this?" and so forth. And it was one of great debate and opposition in some people's minds as to whether this institution should ever have women attend, et cetera, et cetera, that goes on today, whether it's Ranger School, or other kind of things, et cetera.

Interviewer:

If I'm not mistaken, it's somewhere in '74, early '75, that Congress says, "Yes, it's going to happen in summer of '76," and you know it's not a "Should we debate any more?" It's a "How do we debate?"

Joseph Anderson:

That's exactly - how do get it done? How do we get it done?

Interviewer:

So from the military perspective, itâ€™s now, â€œOkay, weâ€™ve got our orders.â€

Joseph Anderson:

Follow orders, yeah. Yep.

Interviewer:

â€œWe salute the flag, and we follow orders,â€ some perhaps more grudgingly than others.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly right.

Interviewer:

What were the classroom discussions like with Cadets about that in that era, do you remember?

Joseph Anderson:

Mixed, you know, and my personal attitude was always if a woman can do the requirements, the fundamentals, what difference does it make?

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so I just did not have any concerns about that in terms of carrying a pack, in terms of traveling, in terms of marching, in terms of firing a weapon, and so forth. And thatâ€™s what I conveyed to my Cadets that were in my classes.

Interviewer:

So outside of class, you mentioned thereâ€™s obviously a small group of Officers here, African-American Officers, here, in a variety of functions across the post. But outside of class, what kind of things did - I assume youâ€™re still a Captain then?

Joseph Anderson:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Did Captain Anderson involve himself in?

Joseph Anderson:

And I guess Major, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer:

And eventually Major, by the time you left, yeah.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

What kind of things were you getting yourself involved in outside the classroom teaching responsibilities, in terms of interacting with the Cadets, or?

Joseph Anderson:

I taught as I - I did initially Comparative Government, and then the last two years, Operation Crossroads Africa ran - excuse me, Problems of Developing Nations ran the Crossroads Program. Did some mentoring with individual Cadets, although we didnâ€™t have a structured or formal Mentoring Program.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And was involved somewhat in the community, and New York, as I was taking classes at Columbia, and so forth, working on my PhD, et cetera, et cetera.

Interviewer:

So one of the things I know in that same time frame, this is about the time where - well, it is the time, in the class of â€™74, where we start to get a much larger - at least for the time - much larger segment of African-American all males at that time in these classes. And I believe thatâ€™s about the same time frame where the Cultural Affairs Seminar comes up as a de facto black Student Union. Were you involved with that at all, or was that just

something else that was going on you were aware of, but not involved in?

Joseph Anderson:

I was aware of it. If individuals needed and wanted interaction along those lines, I was certainly available, but not the Officer in Charge, or engaged, and so forth. I didn't sing in the Cadet Glee Club and the Chapel Choir when I was here, and so was familiar with, but not an Officer in Charge of any of those things. So more on an individual basis than with any of the structured organizations or activities.

Interviewer:

Okay. And as those Cadets graduated, did you get the sense that those were relationships that were going to become lasting relationships, or were they relationships that were probably going to end as those guys left?

Joseph Anderson:

Had no thoughts or expectations about them continuing as Junior Officers in the service, and at that point, I was coming out of the teaching experience, going to Fort Leavenworth, to the Command and General Staff College, as opposed to a post where I would interact with Officers, Junior Officers. And then from there, went to the White House Fellow Program.

Interviewer:

So again.

Joseph Anderson:

So it was just not on my mind. And then having left the service after the White House Fellow Program, you know, I was off in a different direction.

Interviewer:

Yeah, so - that's a good point. It's interesting when you look at the list of some of those early '70s classes, and one of the things that we're trying to do with this project is kind of see where all those folks went in their careers, whether it's in the service or out, and see where those connections come back into play, and where the lines cross back over each other from previous times here. That's why I was asking that question mainly, but. So you said you went to Leavenworth, '76-'77, after three years here. Did the best year of your life out there. And then did the White House Fellows Program right out of CGSC.

Joseph Anderson:

Leavenworth - yeah.

Interviewer:

And then at some point, you said you left the service after the White House Fellow Program, is that -

Joseph Anderson:

Correct.

Interviewer:

Okay. So what year does that get us up to?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, I started my White House Fellow Program in September 1, 1977, and it was a one-year program, '77-'78. I interviewed with a number of different Washington agencies, and wound up going to the Department of Commerce, where Juanita Kreps was the Secretary of Commerce, and this was the end of the Carter Administration.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And so I had just a wonderful, wonderful experience there in terms of understanding how our government system works - or doesn't work, depending upon your time and view and so forth - and was going along in the White House Fellow Program with every expectation of going back to the Army from there. Was mentored by Colin Powell, and he was in the Pentagon at that time and had been a previous White House Fellow, and would

get together with me every three or four months and say, "Hey, how you doing? Keep in mind that even though you've got this business suit on going to work every day, you're still an Officer in the Army. Don't let your head get big going in and out of the White House. You're going to be back to soldiering after this year's up." Which I tease him about, say if there's anything he's ever failed at in life, it's only me.

Because I didn't go back to the Army.

Interviewer:

So obviously, that's not a decision that you enter into lightly at that point in your career.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly right.

Interviewer:

And you just decided that that was the way you wanted to go, and -

Joseph Anderson:

And so what happened is I was in the White House Fellow Program, and traveling. We went to the Panama Canal. We went to certain places in the country looking at various programs and institutions. As such, we had a number of different speakers in, from industry, from the Supreme Court, other Cabinet Officers, blah blah blah. Well, Henry Ford was one of our guest speakers, from Ford Motor Company, and I was the host for that particular meeting.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

And so I'm sitting next to Henry Ford, and we're chatting and so forth before I introduce him. And I introduced him, and he made his presentation, and left. And I remember very clearly, it was like Thanksgiving time frame of '77, he sent his head hunters back, and tried to recruit me to leave the Army and come to Ford Motor Company. And I'd already been talked to by a White House Fellow alumnus who was at General Motors to say, "Would you consider going to General Motors?" And I said to both, "Well, you know, I don't have that option."

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

"Been to graduate school, incurred some years of commitment; been in the White House Fellow Program, now getting more years of commitment, so I'm not free to make those decisions. Thanks for the interest, but I'm going to be doing my thing in the Army for a while, for sure."

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

So this was in the Thanksgiving time frame, and then January-February, the Secretary of Commerce, Juanita Kreps, said, "Hey, we're doing some great things." I was working with her in International Trade, which is becoming an issue. She and I had gone to Saudi Arabia together; you know, a female Cabinet Officer and a African-American White House Fellow - kind of unique in Saudi Arabia.

Interviewer:

How 'bout that.

Joseph Anderson:

And I was working with her, had done some things. She wanted to go to Chicago, and she asked me to set up, make some contacts and set up a meeting with minority businesses in Chicago, as she dealt with other businesses in the bigger community. And I had done that, I'd arranged that. It was an excellent experience. And so she asked me if I'd stay on another year, and help her continue with some of the projects, and I said the same thing. I said, "I don't have any choice. I've got to go back to the Army." She says,

“Oh, you always have choices.” And I said, “Oh?” And so without taking any action, I called both Ford and General Motors, and I asked them both were they still interested, and they both said, “Yes.” And I said, “Well, I’ve never been to Detroit, and I’ve never seen anything in the auto industry. Could I come out and see what this is all about?” And they said, “Yes.”

And so I took a couple trips to Detroit, one with General Motors, one with Ford. And said, “Hmm. I could do this. These are troops just like I know troops.”

Interviewer:

Okay.

Joseph Anderson:

“They’ve got wrenches instead of rifles. They’re fighting the Japanese instead of the Vietnamese, you know. This can work.” So I went back to the Secretary, and I said, “What’d you have in mind?” And she said, “Well, I’d like you to continue to work, make you a member of the Senior Executive Service, GS16, and we can continue to work on the projects we had.” So I called back General Motors and Ford, and I said, “Well, that trip I came out, how did it go?” And they said, “It went well.” And I said, “Well, what’d you have in mind?” And they said, “Well, we’d like you to do X, come out, join us, and take on a job.” I said, “Well, would you hold that offer for a year?” And they both said, “Yes.”

Interviewer:

Oh - okay.

Joseph Anderson:

So I went back to the Secretary, and I said, “Okay, well, now that you’ve told me what you have in mind, I still have this commitment to the Army.” She called the White House, the White House called the Pentagon, and I was out of the Army.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Joseph Anderson:

Just like that. So I - and the issue was post-Vietnam, 1977-78, the war was over, the budget was shrinking, promotions were declining. I was going to be a brand-new Lieutenant Colonel in the Pentagon, in my mind, emptying wastebaskets would be the magnitude of significance of the responsibility that I would have.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And I said, “I can go do that, or I can go learn something new in the auto industry,” and I made that decision to leave the Army, and went to General Motors. I got interviewed by both Ford and General Motors - again - for a final position, and Ford was true to form and said, “Okay, we’ve got an opportunity for you in the foundry,” because - and in my mind, that translated “The foundry is the dirtiest work we have in the auto industry, and that’s where all our African-Americans are relegated to, so we want you to go to the dirty job and clean up this with your excellent leadership from the military.” General Motors said, “We want you to go to Pontiac Motor Division. We’ll give you a commitment of growth and development. In three years, if you perform to our expectation, we’ll make you a plant manager,” in writing.

Interviewer:

Choice B.

Joseph Anderson:

I chose Pontiac Motor and General Motors.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Joseph Anderson:

I was a plant manager in 18 months, not 3 years.

Interviewer:

Nice. So leadership is leadership.

Joseph Anderson:

Leadership is leadership.

Interviewer:

Thatâ€™s incredible.

Joseph Anderson:

And their view was, â€œWe can teach you the automobile industry a lot easier than we could teach our lower-level automobile managers to be leaders with executive potential.â€

Interviewer:

Right. So someone else had already paid for the leadership training; they took the benefit.

Joseph Anderson:

And created their leaders in the industry. And so myself and an Air Force two-star General were the first two black plant managers in General Motors in 1979.

Interviewer:

Interesting. One last question - or a couple of last questions - but on the post-military side of your career, how did you find yourself getting back involved? I know you were involved with AOG at various points over those years. How did that come about in terms of -

Joseph Anderson:

Well, when I came back to teach in â€™73, Art Hester was leaving, and I think Ed Banks had also been here in Admissions -

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And I think one of them - I think Art - had been in Admissions, but also on the AOG Board.

Interviewer:

Right. That was Art Hester. Thatâ€™s correct.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. So Art suggested that I consider being on the AOG Board, which I did. And so I went on the AOG Board in 1973 and did it for 15 years straight -

Interviewer:

Wow.

Joseph Anderson:

And became an Emeritus Director. And so all the things that go on at West Point, as an Emeritus Director, I get the communications and interaction and so forth. To include now being on the Capital Campaign For Us All, where they read black enterprise and think thereâ€™s something there.

Interviewer:

Well, I think itâ€™s interesting. I mean with both yourself and Art Hester before you, number one, in that time frame, neither of you were incredibly old grads.

Joseph Anderson:

Nope.

Interviewer:

Youâ€™re both very young grads at that point, and thatâ€™s not the typical person you think of when you think AOG Board.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Of Trustees or Directors, whatever it was called at that particular time. And then also obviously thereâ€™s not much African-American component available to be on the Board, of graduates, at that point.

Joseph Anderson:

Thatâ€™s exactly right.

Interviewer:

So what was that experience like as a relatively younger guy, in those meetings with a bunch of older guys?

Joseph Anderson:

Well, it was a good experience in that I was there, and over the 15 years, became known. And whatever had helped me from Boys State to Boys Nation, and helped me at West Point as a Plebe, Battalion Commander, Regimental Commander, had helped me relative to leadership in Vietnam - all those things continued. And so the acceptance of myself as a Board Member, a Board of Trustees Member, that continued to be asked to serve, continued, and positioned me in preparation for other Board experiences where now I serve on three public boards. Over my career, I've probably served on eight or nine New York Stock Exchange public boards, and other private boards, and so forth and so on. So it all builds as an experience base over time.

Interviewer:

Now, how long did you stay with GM? You said you went with them after the Commerce year, second year.

Joseph Anderson:

I stayed with GM 13 years, same number of years as the Army.

Interviewer:

13 and it's time to do something else, huh?

Joseph Anderson:

And exact same thing.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Joseph Anderson:

General Motors in the 1991-'92 frame began to downsize.

Interviewer:

Right.

Joseph Anderson:

And reorganize again.

Interviewer:

That was after the government bail-out time, right?

Joseph Anderson:

No, no, '90, yeah.

Interviewer:

'90, I'm sorry, wrong dates.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly. And so I was running a business unit, had about 7,000 people working for me, we were doing about a billion dollars in revenue, which is not a lot of money in General Motors. So I wasn't even a Vice President. But had manufacturing, engineering, finance - all the functions reporting to me. You know, running a company inside General Motors, so to speak; a business inside General Motors. General Motors went through another restructuring, and said, "We're going to change our approach, and instead of you having all the functions of the business, we're just going to make you a manufacturing guy, and over the operations." Well, I didn't want to take that step backwards, and have only operations as opposed to the business. And so about the same time I got asked to consider working for a guy that was buying companies, and he needed somebody to run those companies.

And rather than go to the Pentagon and empty wastebaskets, go back to being a manufacturing manager as opposed to business, I accepted the decision to leave General Motors, and bought my first company. Made a lot of mistakes, thinking that I'd had all this experience inside General Motors, so I'd just transfer it to a small company; well, it doesn't work that way. But I survived, even if the company didn't, and in the next series of effort, to bring us to date, I've become what the people call a serial

entrepreneur. I've owned and operated 13 different companies now. Sold those companies to a number of African-Americans that were running them for me, creating a legacy of wealth in the African-American community.

Interviewer:

Right, but you're still in Detroit, right?

Joseph Anderson:

Still in Detroit, so where I was number five or four on the black enterprise list, now the guys that I sold those businesses to, he's number four on the black enterprise list. And another guy is doing \$60 or \$70 million in revenue. And I'm on the list with new companies that I've bought. And so instead of me alone being on the list, there are three people on the list, and there will be more, and that will be my legacy.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Joseph Anderson:

And parallel to that is the activities that I'm engaged with For Us All Campaign, where I'm driving and leading the effort of including African-Americans in the Capital Campaign to support the diversity initiatives, to make sure that the experiences these African-American Cadets have now are sustainable, and the system, and retention, and leadership positions in the Army, going forward.

Interviewer:

Sir, that's awesome. That's great, and that's one of the ones I introduced you to in the hallway before we came in.

Joseph Anderson:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

You know, he's a beneficiary of the Excel Program.

Joseph Anderson:

Yeah. Exactly.

Interviewer:

One of our foremost alumnis.

Joseph Anderson:

And I came back and spoke to the Excel Program.

Interviewer:

Yeah, I know you talked to them in the fall.

Joseph Anderson:

Last year.

Interviewer:

Yep. I missed that, unfortunately; I was out of town I think that same day, but. If you look back at it all, now that you guys are almost exactly 50 years post-graduation, and your affiliation class is about to depart here on Saturday, what's your lasting lesson from the decision to leave Topeka, Kansas, and try out this West Point thing and see what happens?

Joseph Anderson:

Without reservation, qualification, this was the best thing that could ever have happened to me. Everything I am, everything I ever hope to be, I owe to West Point, and that says it all.

Interviewer:

That's a great stop point right there, sir. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Joseph Anderson:

All right.