

Charles Ellington Interview

DANDRIDGE: Inviting the project to your home Mr. Ellington. Uh, this is December the 13, uh, an interview with Mr. Charles S. Ellington and his Daughter in Law is here, Jill Ellington who is helping out a great deal. We really appreciate your time, and your willingness to share your story about your participation in the military during WWII. Let's begin with just some background information. Can you tell us where you were born and you grew up?

ELLINGTON: I was born in a little town in north Kansas, uh Sabetha, about 7 miles south of the Nebraska line.

DANDRIDGE: What did your parents do for a living?

ELLINGTON: Well they just worked around different things, different places you know.

DANDRIDGE: what did they do for a living?

ELLINGTON: Well, just different odd jobs in the city. In the town

DANDRIDGE: Did you all live in a home? Or you lived in an apartment?

ELLINGTON: We lived in a home.

DANDRIDGE: Did you own the home?

ELLINGTON: Uh yea. Yea they owned the home.

DANDRIDGE: Ok how many sisters and brothers did you have?

ELLINGTON: Didn't have any.

DANDRIDGE: You're the only child?

ELLINGTON: (Laughs) Yea that's right.

DANDRIDGE: Where did you go to school?

ELLINGTON: I started going to grade school in Sabetha, Ks.

DANDRIDGE: And what was that school like? Grade school?

ELLINGTON: It was enjoyable, it was ok. I had a good time there. I mean I had a lot of friends there.

DANDRIDGE: Was it a large school?

ELLINGTON: Oh, not real large no. I forgot how many students we had, but not many.

DANDRIDGE: How many grades did it have? Do you remember?

ELLINGTON: Let's see, eight grades, and two junior highs.

DANDRIDGE: Ok and everybody went to that school?

ELLINGTON: Everybody went to that school, then went to high school.

DANDRIDGE: Were there both white and African Americans there?

ELLINGTON: Yea, they were. Race didn't matter. Cause I was about the only one that wasn't white that was in my class.

DANDRIDGE: Did you have any African American teachers?

ELLINGTON: No.

DANDRIDGE: there any teachers around that area-?

ELLINGTON: No, no. no African American teachers

DANDRIDGE: Ok, what other things did you do growing up. What was your routine in the house? What was your household chores?

ELLINGTON: Oh, a few, Go to the store. I lived with my grandmother a lot. I lived mainly with my grandmother and I use to go to the store for her, and bring either food back or sometimes a container of Kerosene because we had a Kerosene stove that we cooked on. So I use to do stuff like that. And that was usually my house hold chores. And help keep the house clean.

DANDRIDGE: Did your grandmother live nearby?

ELLINGTON: I lived with her.

DANDRIDGE: Oh you lived with her. And everybody lived in the same home?

ELLINGTON: Yea lived in the same house, except, some of the others were gone. Even my mother was gone.

DANDRIDGE: Mm hmm. And what would she be doing when she was gone?

ELLINGTON: Well she was working in Topeka.

DANDRIDGE: Oh, so how did she get back and forth from home to Topeka?

ELLINGTON: Well she just got a bus and went back and forth from Topeka to Sabetha.

DANDRIDGE: Really?

ELLINGTON: My Father wasn't around.

DANDRIDGE: What year did you say you were born?

ELLINGTON: 1924

DANDRIDGE: Ok, alright. And uh, so when your mother would be away in Topeka working, your grandmother would take you?

ELLINGTON: (Overlapping) my grandmother, and she would work too for some people here in Sabetha.

DANDRIDGE: So what kind of things would you do for fun when you were growing up?

ELLINGTON: I've always loved airplanes. Whenever I could and had the money, from somebody- or relatives, usually my aunt, my mom's older sister- I would buy model airplanes and make model airplanes. I loved airplanes when I was a kid.

DANDRIDGE: So did you kind of have a sense of what you wanted to do when you got out of school?

ELLINGTON: I thought I wanted to fly airplanes. But I didn't think about, at that time there wasn't any of us flying airplanes in the military. I heard of a few, but there wasn't too many of us flying airplanes.

DANDRIDGE: Well what attracted you to airplanes back in the 20s and 30s?

ELLINGTON: I don't know I use see them go by, use to see them fly by and every once and awhile they would land in a patch (?) there. And one time, me and a male cousin, we went to where the plane landed over in the passenger and they went up for a ride. I didn't go up for a ride. I wanted to take a ride, but my mother didn't have the money to spend for me to ride.

DANDRIDGE: So what other kind of things did you do? What did you and your buddies do? Did you play outside?

ELLINGTON: Well we played outside a lot. Like cowboys and Indians at the time. We use to see, there was a lot of movies. We use to shoot rubber guns, shoot at each other.

DANDRIDGE: Mm hmm. So did you go to the movies a lot?

ELLINGTON: Well, as much as I could. They were pretty cheap so I went to movies quite a bit.

DANDRIDGE: Did you have to sit in a certain place in the movie theater?

ELLINGTON: Uh, yes we did have to sit in a certain place in the movie theater.

DANDRIDGE: Where did you sit?

ELLINGTON: We had to sit in the back, way in the back towards the right side of the theater.

DANDRIDGE: When you were playing, were some of your playmates white?

ELLINGTON: Most of my playmates were my cousins.

DANDRIDGE: So there was a big family of you all?

ELLINGTON: Yea there was a lot. I didn't have any brothers and sisters. But I had a lot of cousins to play with.

DANDRIDGE: Ok. What about, church? Were you attending Church?

ELLINGTON: Yes, there was a church there in Sabetha. I can't think of the name of it.

DANDRIDGE: Was it Baptist?

ELLINGTON: No, it was AME.

DANDRIDGE: Ok. And what did you all do? Did you have to go every Sunday?

ELLINGTON: My grandmother, I was with her. And she would take me to church. We'd go every Sunday. On certain occasions- I think it was in August or June or something like that- they would have a program called children's day. And some of the ladies would have a bunch of us get together and sing song. She'd play the piano and we'd sing.

DANDRIDGE: So, in terms of your growing up, what are some of your best memories of growing up in Sabetha?

ELLINGTON: I don't know, I can't think of any of my best memories.

DANDRIDGE: Or what are some of your memories? Most prominent memory may I say?

ELLINGTON: I know I had fun. I had two cousins that were almost like brother and sister to me and we had a lot of fun together.

DANDRIDGE: Who were they? What were their names?

ELLINGTON: Their names? The girl's name was Rosalee and the boy's name was Merit and their last name was Scott.

DANDRIDGE: So did you go through the eighth grade in the-

ELLINGTON: (Interjecting) I went through the eighth grade, in fact I went through junior high in Sabetha. My mother wanted to make a permanent home in Topeka. She had remarried

somebody from Topeka, and she got me to come move to Topeka and I started at Topeka High. And there was just three years at Topeka high: sophomore, junior and senior.

DANDRIDGE: Right. And who did your mother remarry?

ELLINGTON: She married a man named Jay Hickman in Topeka.

DANDRIDGE: And so you came to live with them?

ELLINGTON: Yes I came to live with them, In Topeka.

DANDRIDGE: Ok. And what did Mr. Hickman do for a living?

ELLINGTON: He worked at the Santa Fe Federal.

DANDRIDGE: At the shops?

ELLINGTON: Yea, at the shops.

DANDRIDGE: Let's go back to Sabetha when you were growing up there. What were race relations like there?

ELLINGTON: I saw nothing wrong with the race relations there. There may have been one or two that didn't like me too well. And if they would pick on me- white boys that I'm talking about- they'd pick on me, I had one or two that would help me, if we got in a fight. So race relations to me was good.

DANDRIDGE: You didn't ever think about anything that was going on that involved tensions between the two groups?

ELLINGTON: No, not between the two groups. There were places, nationally and Sabetha where, well maybe restaurants where you couldn't go into eat, something like that. But I didn't pay attention to that. We didn't go into restaurants anyway.

DANDRIDGE: Were your parents active in any NAACP activities? Or any Civil Rights?

ELLINGTON: No

DANDRIDGE: What kind of organizations were you folks involved in? Any organizations outside the church?

ELLINGTON: None that I know of outside of the church.

DANDRIDGE: Ok. So going to Topeka, what was it like making that transition from Sabetha to Topeka that was a little bit larger?

ELLINGTON: Well, Topeka was a large school and, my mother said, “Charles, things are different here in Topeka. You’ll be around a lot of white people.” at that time we were colored, you’re around mostly colored people. So that was true. In fact, the class I was in, there wasn’t a large group of colored students there. So we hung together in certain groups.

DANDRIDGE: As a youngster at Topeka High, what other things did you participate at the school? What organizations?

ELLINGTON: Well, as far as sports are concerned, at that time- and I wasn’t interested anyway, even in Sabetha- I tried a little baseball or football or something like that, I wasn’t too interested in that anyway in Topeka High. But Topeka High was actually segregated as far as sports were concerned. And the only thing they would let us do when I was there was run track. And I went out for track.

DANDRIDGE: Oh, so did you go to the track meets and that sort of thing?

ELLINGTON: Yea I went out for track, I would run track against other schools.

DANDRIDGE: Against other schools?

ELLINGTON: Yeah

DANDRIDGE: So in that, there was no segregation in that policy?

ELLINGTON: Not in that part of it. Not in track. There was in football, baseball, and basketball. Topeka High had their own Black [basketball] team called the Ramblers.

DANDRIDGE: Right. When you were traveling with track did you ever travel outside the city with the track team?

ELLINGTON: No, no mostly in town. Other high schools in town.

DANDRIDGE: Did you win anything in track?

ELLINGTON: (Laughs) no I didn’t win. Maybe I won a race or so. But I eventually got discouraged because I could out run a lot of the white boys but one or two or the black boys would beat me and I got kinda discouraged. (Laughs)

DANDRIDGE: (Laughs)

ELLINGTON: I shouldn’t have said Black I meant Colored.

DANDRIDGE: Oh well it doesn’t make any difference. What were your teachers like in Topeka High?

ELLINGTON: They were good, they were OK. As far as I can remember. I took the usual courses. I had to take English and History and sort of thing. I did take a couple of years of Spanish at Topeka High. And became pretty good in Spanish because we had a lot of Mexican students there. So I took a couple of years in Spanish, and I wanted to get into science so I took Physics. And I think I took one year of Chemistry in Junior high.

DANDRIDGE: Where were you living in Topeka? You remember your street?

ELLINGTON: I was living on 13th Monroe street.

DANDRIDGE: So you were right near Monroe school.

ELLINGTON: Yea right near Monroe school. And actually, when I first went there- of course Monroe school was all colored. That's the way it was in the grade schools. I use to go down there and play with some of the kids. We'd play games at Monroe school.

DANDRIDGE: Did you play on the grounds or did you play across the street where they-

ELLINGTON: (Interjecting) on the grounds usually.

DANDRIDGE: On the grounds? Ok. Now did they have dances there are Monroe school, senior High-?

ELLINGTON: (Interjecting) you know, I think they did. I think they did but I can't remember too much about it because I didn't participate in it. I wasn't too much of a dancer. (laughs)

DANDRIDGE: So, what did you like about Topeka High as oppose to going to School in Sabetha? Anything new or different?

ELLINGTON: I had a lot of friends at Topeka High.

DANDRIDGE: So did you begin courting at Topeka High?

ELLINGTON: A little bit. There were one or two that I liked real well. And we kinda got together a little bit. Not real much but a little bit.

DANDRIDGE: So what did you do on your dates? Where did you take them?

ELLINGTON: Well, I didn't go on too many dates. Maybe we went to a movie or two, something like that and that'll be about it.

DANDRIDGE: So in terms of, your mother and your father, what church did they get involved in, in Topeka?

ELLINGTON: The AME church. It wasn't too far from where we lived on Monroe Street. I lived 13th in Monroe and I think the church was about 15th in Monroe if I'm not mistaken. And they use to go there.

DANDRIDGE: So did you ever go to St. John?

ELLINGTON: I never went to St. John until I became an adult.

DANDRIDGE: Did you find race relations in Topeka similar to that in Sabetha or how would you describe it?

ELLINGTON: I guess race relations as far as I'm concerned were alright in Topeka, because I had a lot of friends that I could go around with you know, and have fun with.

DANDRIDGE: Did you ever go down 4th street?

ELLINGTON: Yeah.

DANDRIDGE: What did you do there?

ELLINGTON: There was theater down there.

DANDRIDGE: Yeah and it was owned by African Americans?

ELLINGTON: Yea, they had a theater, and actually it was about the only one we could go to. And of course there was Max tavern, where you could go- I wasn't much of a drinker, I didn't drink- but I would go down there and some of us would shoot pool.

DANDRIDGE: Mm hmm. Where did you go to buy groceries?

ELLINGTON: I really can't remember.

DANDRIDGE: Well that's ok. So did you have a car? Did your family have a car?

ELLINGTON: My step father had a car.

DANDRIDGE: Did you learn how to drive when you were in high school?

ELLINGTON: No, no I didn't learn how to drive when I was in high school. No, I sure didn't.

DANDRIDGE: Did most of your buddies have cars? You're male friends?

ELLINGTON: Everybody that wanted to, had a car, and in fact there were one or two who had motorcycles. And I don't know where they got the money to do it (Laughs)

DANDRIDGE: So you graduated from Topeka High?

ELLINGTON: I graduated from Topeka High.

DANDRIDGE: And what was that graduation like?

ELLINGTON: Well...

DANDRIDGE: Or do you remember anything from it?

ELLINGTON: I don't remember a whole lot from it.

DANDRIDGE: When the African American students were graduating, did they have to sit in a different place than the others? Or do you remember?

ELLINGTON: I think we did sit in a different place, sure.

DANDRIDGE: Uh huh. So after you graduated, then what did you do?

ELLINGTON: A friend of mine, now he was 2 years ok than me, ok? He was at Washburn University. You knew Bill Price?

DANDRIDGE: I knew of him

ELLINGTON: You knew of Bill Price? I think the war had started and they had announced that they were going to let colored guys try to fly airplanes. And one time they said that they couldn't do it because they didn't have the coordination, didn't have the intelligence, they just weren't the right type to do it. Well anyway, he and I decided we were going to take the examination for aviation cadet. Which we did. I was just out of high school, he had 2 or 3 years of Washburn, and we took the examination at Washburn, and that was in 1942, he passed it. And I think I passed it, but I'm not quite sure, he did better than I did. He was called into the service to fly airplanes and I wasn't. And so they called him to Tuskegee to take the training. And me, they didn't call me so I just stayed on until I was drafted. I was drafted like a year later.

DANDRIDGE: So what kind of things have you been hearing about when the war began in '41? What kind of things in your community do you remember they were talking about before you got drafted?

ELLINGTON: Well I can't really remember anything.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, what did your family and friends think about WWII?

ELLINGTON: I don't know, nobody said too much about it.

DANDRIDGE: Were you aware of anything outside of Topeka, outside of Kansas, what race relations were like? Across the nation?

ELLINGTON: Oh yea, I've heard about it, I heard about it cause we use to take the papers like the Kansas City Call would be full of information. And the Pittsburg currier, we use to get those papers and there'd be a lot of stuff about race relations.

DANDRIDGE: And so, when the war broke out, what did you think? Did you think you were going to join it even if you did not pass the flying test?

ELLINGTON: Well, I just waited, in the summer of 1943 I was drafted into the army.

DANDRIDGE: Why didn't you just sign up before then?

ELLINGTON: Well, I just didn't.

DANDRIDGE: What were you doing? Were you working? Did you get a little job after high school?

ELLINGTON: Actually the summer between the time I graduated school 'til I was drafted, I went out to Washburn. My aunt paid for one semester at Washburn University and I went to school there.

DANDRIDGE: What kind of courses? Do you remember what you took?

ELLINGTON: I know I took English, history, and some physics.

DANDRIDGE: oh wow, did you like it?

ELLINGTON: Yea, cause I was always interested into getting in that part of it.

DANDRIDGE: Uh huh. Did you kind of know what you wanted to do as a career or at that point?

ELLINGTON: Well I wasn't really sure at that point what I wanted to do. I wasn't sure.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, so when you were drafted, what was that like? Did a letter come to your home?

ELLINGTON: I guess so, I don't remember now.

DANDRIDGE: What did your mother say when you got drafted?

ELLINGTON: I don't know (Laughs)

DANDRIDGE: Was she concerned?

ELLINGTON: Oh yea she was concerned alright, but I guess it was just one of those things. A lot of them that I knew had been drafted, so I did one silly thing. I called the draft board, and I said "a lot of my friends had been drafted, and I was wondering why I haven't been." They said "what's your name?" and I told her my name, about a week later I got the draft notice. (Laughs)

DANDRIDGE: So you wanted to be with your friends?

ELLINGTON: I wanted to go too. A lot of my friends had gone, and I wanted to go too.

DANDRIDGE: Do you remember some of your friends' names?

ELLINGTON: I can't remember too much.

DANDRIDGE: Was Charles Scott one of your friends? One of your colleagues?

ELLINGTON: no

DANDRIDGE: Frederick Temple?

ELLINGTON: Well Frederick Temple, he was just a little older than me, he was a PI before I was. Remember Bill Gains? There was Bill Gains, and I can't think of too many others.

DANDRIDGE: Do you remember any women joining in the WAX or anything coming out of Topeka? Any of the women joining the military in the female unit?

ELLINGTON: No I don't remember any women.

DANDRIDGE: So you were in school when you were drafted?

ELLINGTON: Well, I wasn't in school when I had drafted, no.

DANDRIDGE: You were at Washburn when you were drafted?

ELLINGTON: Well, I had finished the semester at Washburn, because I started the semester in September and I was drafted in July.

DANDRIDGE: Once you were drafted, then what did you do? What was the process that you had to follow through on?

ELLINGTON: I had to go to Ft. Leavenworth to be interviewed and I had passed the examination for aviation cadet ok? So the army interviewed me, then it came down to the Navy. I knew I did not want to go to the Navy.

DANDRIDGE: Why?

ELLINGTON: I did not want to go on a boat, I did not want to go into the water, and I told them. You know they check me out, and at that time I had great eyes. They had an examination you get and there's a lot of colors in there where you could see either letters or numbers you know? So they said "you would make a good man for the navy" I said "I don't want to go to the Navy" they said "why not?" I said "well, I don't want to be on a boat with all that water, I don't like the uniforms." I told the navy guy that, "I don't like the uniform, and not only that, there's a lot of discrimination in the navy." And the guy says, "Oh no, not anymore, you can do anything you want to in the Navy." I said "Can I fly airplanes in the navy?" He said "Oh. You can't do that."

(laughs). I pulled it out of my pocket, “I have a note here, where I passed the examination for aviation cadet in the army. So if I can’t do it in the Navy, why can’t I go to the army and do it then?” and they could see I was very determined not to go to the Navy. So this guy says, “Ok, you go on then.” So they let me go and I went to the army.

DANDRIDGE: What had you’d heard about the navy and its discrimination?

ELLINGTON: Well, yea, usually the guys had to be kind of a servant or something like that to the officers. Keep their quarters clean and stuff like that. And they weren’t trained to do anything.

DANDRIDGE: How did you know that? Where did you hear it?

ELLINGTON: I don’t know, I read about it somewhere, that they weren’t trained. Like that guy- he went out there and grabbed a gun, I forget that guy’s name, in the Navy. When the Japanese came over, he went out there and grabbed a gun and started shooting. He wasn’t trained to do that, he just did it. And they hadn’t trained us to do anything in the Navy.

DANDRIDGE: That’s interesting. Let me ask this questions: So once you were at Leavenworth, and you did the interviews then what happened?

ELLINGTON: Well, I came home. And I had to catch a train to go to where my basic training.

DANDRIDGE: Right ok. So where did you go for your basic training?

ELLINGTON: I went to Camp Crowder, Missouri.

DANDRIDGE: How did they happen to send you there?

ELLINGTON: I don’t know, but they did. They sent me to Camp Crowder- in a blackout pit. And they trained me to shoot all kinds of guns, bayonet training, the whole works. After you finished camp Crowder, you were ready- and a lot of them did, to go to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese. So that’s what they were training us for.

DANDRIDGE: Do you remember the name of the unit you were with?

ELLINGTON: No I don’t remember the name.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, well tell me what that basic training camp, what was the physical conditions? What was that like? Were you in tents? Were you in barracks that were made of wood?

ELLINGTON: Barracks, yea we were barracks.

DANDRIDGE: You weren’t just in tents?

ELLINGTON: No, wooden barracks. Sometimes we would have to go out into the field, they want you to get all kinds of training. So they make us go out into the field, maybe pitch a tent, and stay all night or something. But there would be somebody to cook for us the next day so we could have something to eat.

DANDRIDGE: So this was an all African American unit. Were there any white officers? Do you remember?

ELLINGTON: Well actually, the noncommissioned were black, but the officers were white.

DANDRIDGE: Who were some of the people that you met?

ELLINGTON: I really can't think of their names.

DANDRIDGE: But what do you remember about them?

ELLINGTON: Oh we got along fine. I know there were some from St. Louis.

DANDRIDGE: Were there any from Topeka with you?

ELLINGTON: Yes there was. I can't think of their names.

DANDRIDGE: Were there some from the Deep South?

ELLINGTON: Oh yea, there were some from all over actually.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, uh huh, how did you like meeting all of those people?

ELLINGTON: Oh, I liked it. I liked it ok, we got along fine. I liked it.

DANDRIDGE: Was it different for you because they were from all over the country?

ELLINGTON: Nah, it wasn't different. We got along fine.

DANDRIDGE: Was a white basic training camp nearby?

ELLINGTON: I don't remember too much about a white basic training camp.

DANDRIDGE: But you don't remember one being nearby?

ELLINGTON: Yea, I don't remember that.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, did you feel like the physical conditions were what you expected for basic training?

ELLINGTON: yea, I thought so. It was definitely basic training and we were trained to do it all. Everything from pistols to those big carbine rifles and all that kinds of stuff. Machine guns and whatever.

DANDRIDGE: Had you shot guns before?

ELLINGTON: No, except for when I was a kid. I did have a rifle that I owned myself. A little rifle (laughs)

DANDRIDGE: Mm hmm. When you first put on that uniform, what did you feel like?

ELLINGTON: Oh I don't know. I just knew that was the way it was supposed to be.

DANDRIDGE: What did you do after basic training?

ELLINGTON: Basic training? Ok, they did some extra work on me to find out if I was qualified for anything. And they found out I had the aptitude for radio training. And they sent me to Kansas. Pittsburg.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, that's good. So you really stayed in this area?

ELLINGTON: I did, I stayed in this area.

DANDRIDGE: So what did you do at that camp?

ELLINGTON: I did some radio training and in fact they were training some guys to climb poles and string lines. I didn't have to do that, but I did some things. Some radio training until they found out I was pretty good at that. They sent me to Daniel Field, Georgia for some radio training. That's where I learned how to be a radio operator.

DANDRIDGE: When you were in the camp that was initially training you for the radio, were you with an all-Black unit then?

ELLINGTON: Oh yea.

DANDRIDGE: Was this a different group than what you-

ELLINGTON: (interjecting) Oh yea, it was a different group.

DANDRIDGE: And then they sent you to Georgia and that was a different group?

ELLINGTON: That was a different group too.

DANDRIDGE: But that also was segregated?

ELLINGTON: It was segregated except the trainers were white. And that's where I met- you see that picture with all of those guys?- that's where we all got together down there in radio training. There was 8 of us and we got radio training and we ended up in ??, Kentucky as radio trainers.

DANDRIDGE: Where in Kentucky?

ELLINGTON: ?? Kentucky. And that's where Colonel Davis was the commander. At one time it was a white commander. It was segregated. But the time I was there, Colonel Davis had taken over, so it was all black.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, all right. So what was that like being in those quarters?

ELLINGTON: It was good, it was nice, nice quarters.

DANDRIDGE: when you say nice, what do you mean "Nice"?

ELLINGTON: Well it was (Laughs) it was a good place to live. The barracks were clean and everything. And the guys, we got along fine together.

DANDRIDGE: What was your daily routine in your camp in Kentucky?

ELLINGTON: Well there were days when we got trained we had to operate the radio for 8 hours, and of course there was 8 of us so we would get some time off. And what we did was sent messages up and down the east coast from New York to Florida. And maybe sometimes an airplane if they had radio operatives on airplanes. But mainly, we sent messages, like I said from base to base. Whatever message we received from them we had to decipher it from Morris Code, and type it down and make a record of it so we could turn it in.

DANDRIDGE: Did you enjoy that?

ELLINGTON: Yea, I did, I did enjoy it.

DANDRIDGE: So, in terms of your communications, was there a supervisor over this group of 8?

ELLINGTON: Oh yeah.

DANDRIDGE: And who was that supervisor? Was that person Black or White?

ELLINGTON: Oh it was Black. The whole thing was Black.

DANDRIDGE: Were they hard on you?

ELLINGTON: Not necessarily.

DANDRIDGE: Did you have to go through physical training? Was that a part of the routine at any camp?

ELLINGTON: I don't remember any physical training I had to do.

DANDRIDGE: But you did it in basic training?

ELLINGTON: In basic training, very physical, very physical (laughs).

DANDRIDGE: Oh, I can imagine. So what did you do for social life? You go off the base?

ELLINGTON: Yea, sure. Some of us guys, we'd go to- I shouldn't go back to Camp Crowder

DANDRIDGE: Sure.

ELLINGTON: But that was right outside of St. Louis and they told us, "Do not go to town alone. If you go to town, go in a group because there's gangs there. And they see a soldier and they will gang up on you, and probably beat you up and steal your money." So we didn't go to town by ourselves. We went in a group. But anyways, camp Crowder that was close to Louisville, Kentucky. And so, yea there's time that we went to Louisville, a group of us. See most of the time it seemed like to me we just went around to different places close to our airfield.

DANDRIDGE: When you went off, did you have some off limits to places that you could not go because you were an African American soldier?

ELLINGTON: Well we knew there were some places we couldn't go. We just knew that.

DANDRIDGE: What were the places you couldn't go?

ELLINGTON: Well, places like the restaurant, places of where they had entertainment, or stuff like that.

DANDRIDGE: Did you go to Churches? Did you attend any churches?

ELLINGTON: Very, very little. I tried to go to church on the holidays: Christmas, Easter, things like that. I never did go too much.

DANDRIDGE: So you never did socialize with the group that lived in the towns nearby?

ELLINGTON: No, not with the two or three towns. I sure didn't.

DANDRIDGE: So after you were doing the radio thing, did you do anything else during WWII?

ELLINGTON: Actually they were training us, general Davis was the commanding officer. When I got there, he and a group of fighter pilots went to North Africa. Then they came back to Germany and they escorted some bombers over from Germany. The bombers, B17, were all white. A lot of them didn't realize that Black pilots were their escort.

DANDRIDGE: Did you know that at the time when you were in Kentucky? Were you aware of that?

ELLINGTON: No, I wasn't there at that time. That was before I got there.

(Pause in recording)

DANDRIDGE: What other things did you do while you were in this camp as a radio operator?

ELLINGTON: Well, that was the main thing actually. The whole base was being trained. The commanding general from Washington DC came down one time and we were all standing out there in attention to hear what he had to say. Cause they didn't know what to do with us.

DANDRIDGE: What do you mean they didn't know what to do with y'all?

ELLINGTON: Just like they didn't know what to do when they trained the pilots. We had bombers on the base, B 25 bombers, and we had fighter planes on there, P47s on the base. So they were ready. They didn't know what to do with us. They didn't know if we were ready or not. The general came and said, "Ok, you guys had enough training now, so in August, you're going to ?? to fight Japan."

DANDRIDGE: Including the radio operators?

ELLINGTON: All of us were going, the whole group. The planes- everybody connected with that base was going.

DANDRIDGE: And that base was all black?

ELLINGTON: All black at the time. Yes.

DANDRIDGE: So what did you think when you heard that?

ELLINGTON: Well, I don't know what I thought. I didn't know what to think (laughs).

DANDRIDGE: Were you concerned?

ELLINGTON: Oh yes I was concerned about going over there because I knew that it would be a battle. But I knew that it would be ok because we had airplanes going with us. I didn't know how we were going to get there. I didn't know whether we was going on plane to get there or I'd be on a ship.

DANDRIDGE: and you didn't want that ship I don't think, did you?

ELLINGTON: well, it would be ok to be to get on a ship to go there. That would be ok. I just didn't want to go to the Navy. I didn't want to be a member of the Navy because I knew the Navy wasn't going to treat me right. But anyways, as you might have heard, President Truman wanted to put an end to the war. The Japanese would not give up. They would not surrender, they wouldn't stop! They wanted to keep fighting, I guess until they killed us all (laughs). So

anyways, he sent the B 29 bombers over there are dropped bombs on those two cities: Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

DANDRIDGE: How did you hear about it when you were serving there in Kentucky?

ELLINGTON: Well, I don't know how I heard about it, but I did.

DANDRIDGE: In any of the messages that you took, did you get a hint of what the war was doing on the Pacific front?

ELLINGTON: No, I don't think so.

DANDRIDGE: What were those messages that you all were conveying and translating, what were they usually saying?

ELLINGTON: Gosh, I can't remember.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, what about the war with Germany? Do you remember anything while you were in Kentucky? About that?

ELLINGTON: Germany? No, except what I maybe read or heard or something.

DANDRIDGE: So after Truman dropped the bomb then what did you do?

ELLINGTON: Well we were very happy because we knew the war was over. The Japanese we figured, would surrender. Which they did. And they met on a ship out there close to Hawaii.

DANDRIDGE: What did you do when all that was going on? What were you doing?

ELLINGTON: Nothing, just doing my job. There wasn't much for me to do except do my job.

DANDRIDGE: Did you like what you were doing?

ELLINGTON: Yea I did. I liked it real well, I really did. I liked the guys I worked with, and I liked what I was doing.

DANDRIDGE: So then after the bombing, then what happened to you?

ELLINGTON: The war was over in October when they finally surrendered. There wasn't much for us to do but do what we had to do and get ready for either staying in the service or go take a discharge.

DANDRIDGE: So what was your choice?

ELLINGTON: I took my discharge.

DANDRIDGE: why did you make that choice?

ELLINGTON: (laughs) because I wanted to get out. I had enough of it.

DANDRIDGE: Why do you say that?

ELLINGTON: I just had enough of it. I had enough of the war, so I just got out. I took my discharge and came home in January 1946.

DANDRIDGE: You came back to Topeka?

ELLINGTON: I came back to Topeka, took my GI Bill, went to Washburn, and met my wife there.

DANDRIDGE: And who was your wife?

ELLINGTON: Her name was Ardis, Minaphees (spelling).

DANDRIDGE: When you came back home, did they have welcoming parties for you?

ELLINGTON: No, I don't remember nothing like that.

DANDRIDGE: Did you meet your other friends, that would come back home too that have been serving in the war? Did you see them and meet with them?

ELLINGTON: Oh sure, yes.

DANDRIDGE: So, what made you make the choice of taking advantage of the GI Bill versus finding a job?

ELLINGTON: Well, because I had an idea that I wanted to be an engineer. So I wanted to go to Washburn. And the only way to be an engineer was to get some knowledge in sciences so that's why I did that. And I had 3 years coming to me. So I went all three years. And actually, when I met my wife the first semester I was there, then we got married. And she had a job.

DANDRIDGE: What was she doing?

ELLINGTON: She was working for a Doctor in Topeka.

DANDRIDGE: Did you live in a home or in an apartment?

ELLINGTON: First place we lived at was out there on west of Gage on ?? street.

DANDRIDGE: Was it an apartment?

ELLINGTON: I wouldn't say it was an apartment. We had a room with kitchen privileges. The man who we rented from had been the principle of a school at one time.

DANDRIDGE: Did you graduate from Washburn?

ELLINGTON: I didn't graduate. I had one semester to go, and I got a job.

DANDRIDGE: Oh, what did you do?

ELLINGTON: I worked for federal agencies in Topeka, ended up at the post office in 1952.

DANDRIDGE: So you took civil service?

ELLINGTON: I took civil service, I knew I couldn't go and finish my engineering degree because I'd have to go on to KU and I was married. And I knew I didn't have the money for that.

DANDRIDGE: Right, did you have children by then?

ELLINGTON: Not by then, I didn't have children until I started working at the post office. My daughter was born after I started working at the post office.

DANDRIDGE: So how many children do you have?

ELLINGTON: Two. My daughter who lives in Delaware now, and my son is in California.

DANDRIDGE: what do they do for a living?

ELLINGTON: my daughter had a great job at a bank, and she worked up to a bank executive at Willington trust. Well the bank sold out to a bank in New York and now she's out of a job and she's looking for another job. And my son is trying to get into acting and modeling. My daughter in law, that's her husband. They've been married for 15 years or so.

DANDRIDGE: When you were serving active duty, what are some of the things you enjoyed the most?

ELLINGTON: I don't know.

DANDRIDGE: what did you enjoy the least?

ELLINGTON: (laughs) I don't know. I really can't think of anything.

DANDRIDGE: when you got to this job, was there a lot of competition in Civil service and getting a job at the post office?

ELLINGTON: You have to take an examination. And they were giving a break to the veterans at the time. And if I'd had been wounded better, I would've gotten a bigger break. So I took the examination, got a reasonably good score, but still they gave me a break so I got into the post office.

DANDRIDGE: Let's go back to you being discharged, do you remember what that process entailed?

ELLINGTON: I almost made a mistake, they wanted to know if I wanted to stay in or what I wanted to do. And I signed up for 3 more years so I could get some additional benefits and training. I had to go to Kansas City to get some training, and they paid me for that. I didn't have to go that often. Not only that, they said you could catch a military airplane and fly someplace wherever you wanted to go. So that was appealing to me. But anyhow, I was glad when it ended. If it hadn't ended, I would've ended up in Korea.

DANDRIDGE: So you decided not to pursue that am I right?

ELLINGTON: Well I did, but it ended just in time- I got my discharge from that too, just before the Korean War started.

DANDRIDGE: When you came out of the war and you were at the post office, did you join any veteran's organizations or any kind of veteran's activities after the war? Did you join the Jordan Patterson post?

ELLINGTON: No I sure didn't. I went to some but I didn't join it.

DANDRIDGE: ok, what kind of things do you remember that you experienced coming back home as a veteran? Was it hard being back home or was it just a different place?

ELLINGTON: No it wasn't hard, just different.

DANDRIDGE: How do you view your participation in the war? What do you think about it?

ELLINGTON: Well, I'm a little disappointed in my participation.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, you want to explain that a little bit?

ELLINGTON: Because I wanted to fly airplanes and I didn't get a chance to. I get questions all the time, you know we go out all the time and we dress in different uniforms, well not in army uniforms, but we dressed in navy blue coat, grey pants, and badge. So I'm military and everything, and different people, white or black [would say] "oh we're sure glad you guys were there, we're glad you did what you did. You really saved us a bunch of trouble." And I'd say to myself, "Now what did I do? I didn't fly airplanes."

DANDRIDGE: Ok, alrighty, but you did manage the radio operation.

ELLINGTON: I did do that.

DANDRIDGE: How do you think your military experience influenced your life?

ELLINGTON: I can't say that it influenced my life in anyway. Not that I can think of. I can't say it did.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience during WWII or afterwards?

ELLINGTON: Well, I can't think of anything I'd like to add. I think I was very fortunate to go through the war and not have to go where the shooting and bombing and all that stuff was. And all the bases I was on, I would feel very secure. You didn't feel like anything was going to happen to you there.

DANDRIDGE: What advice would you give to young people today about joining the military?

ELLINGTON: I have a grandson about that age and I told him, "Don't do it."

DANDRIDGE: Why?

ELLINGTON: To me this stuff that's going on now, Afghanistan, Iraq, that should've never happened.

DANDRIDGE: You think it compares to what WWII would've done?

ELLINGTON: Yes, cause there's nothing that's going on there that's worthwhile for them to give their life for.

DANDRIDGE: But you didn't feel that war about WWII?

ELLINGTON: Well I felt like, "ok, Japanese started the war, it's time to get back at them."

DANDRIDGE: What about Germany?

ELLINGTON: I never thought about Germany too much because we didn't think about going there. But Germany, they were a bad bunch too. But I thought mostly about the Japanese.

DANDRIDGE: When you came back from Kentucky to Topeka did you notice any changes at that time? Particularly in race relations.

ELLINGTON: I came back in '46, I think it was about the same. I know there were still places you couldn't go. I remember after my wife and I got married, the best place we could go, we'd go to Kansas City and go to Poochie's cafeteria. That was the best place to go. You could go there and there'd be all kinds of people in there. But Topeka, like Green or some of those cafeterias, you couldn't go there at the time I got home.

DANDRIDGE: What about when reverend Oliver Brown and the other 12 plaintiffs got involved on the Brown V. Board challenge on the Topeka level. What did you think about it?

ELLINGTON: I thought I was really great that they did that. I wasn't involved in it. Actually, there were members of St. John, Oliver and his wife at that time.

DANDRIDGE: Were you a member of St. John at that time?

ELLINGTON: I think I was just a new member at that time because I knew all those people. When they started this, there were two members at St. John that had a lot to do with it. Alvin, and the Todd's.

DANDRIDGE: Were your children going to school at that time in Topeka?

ELLINGTON: Let's see, my daughter was old enough to go, but at that time we were living over on Oakland. And she went to State Street Elementary.

DANDRIDGE: Now State Street, was it all black at that time?

ELLINGTON: No, it was mixed, but when we moved over on Macvicar street, my daughter went to Boswell Jr. High and they we're mixed too I think.

DANDRIDGE: Yes, all the Jr. High schools were mixed at that time. So did you all get involved in the PTAs or anything like that?

ELLINGTON: No we didn't.

DANDRIDGE: What kind of organizations did you get involved in?

ELLINGTON: None that I could think of.

DANDRIDGE: In terms of your life experiences after the war, how would you characterize them? Were they good? You think you got any benefits out of it?

ELLINGTON: From the government I did yes. (Laughs) The GI Bill, it helped me buy my house and it sent me to school. So yes I got some benefits out of it. I feel like the GI Bill was a big help. It help me get my loan form my home, and a lower interest rate.

DANDRIDGE: Did you get your loan from a White bank?

ELLINGTON: Yes, Capital Federal.

DANDRIDGE: That's interesting. So is there anything that you'd like to add about your experience during WWII and afterwards?

ELLINGTON: I really can't think of anything I could add to it.

DANDRIDGE: What would you like people to remember about your experiences in WWII?

ELLINGTON: I can't think of anything.

DANDRIDGE: Ok, well I appreciate your time, and thank you very much for sharing your story with us.

ELLINGTON: I'm happy that you did this.

DANDRIDGE: Thank you sir.

Mr. Charles Ellington

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