

Interview with Henry Hervey
February 11, 1993
Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection
St. Cloud State University Archives
Interviewed by David Overy

PART ONE

Overy: Mr. Hervey, I noticed from your little biography here that you were born in New Orleans. When did your family move north?

Hervey: My father moved north in – I was born in 1922, so he came here in '22. He worked in the post office in New Orleans and he found out that could be transferred – if he could get here. So he hopped one of those work trains, that they were looking for workers for the railroad, and he probably would have ended up in – where does the railroad stop, somewhere in Minnesota, Rock Island?

Overy: Oh, yeah.

Hervey: But by the time he got to Illinois, he was freezing to death, so he got off. I was born in New Orleans; my sister and brother were born in Chicago.

Overy: I see. Were you in junior college when the war began?

Hervey: I had finished.

Overy: You had finished?

Hervey: Yeah.

Overy: I see. What were you doing when World War 2 began?

Hervey: Well, in '41 they had this Civilian Pilot Training program and we had one flying operator, black operator, who applied for a contract and he got the contract. We would train – we trained in the primary and the secondary phases under the CPT program, and I had my license in '41. But when the war started in December, I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was. But everybody was going, and we had to go in and take the Air Corps exam to see if we could pass the exam then they'd let us finish the course.

Overy: Was there an active effort to recruit you or was it pretty much you on your own initiative doing this?

Hervey: Well, the experiment had been announced, and of course the people that were running the CPT program were aware of it. As a matter of fact, they told us. They said that “now you make up your mind that if you finish this class, you may have to join the Air Corps,” and of course we went down and took the exam. There were 13 of us, and out of the 13, 13 passed. We had then nowhere to go because the quarter that they had allowed for Tuskegee was so small that – I passed the exam in late ‘41 and I didn't go into the air corps until ‘43.

So in the interim there I took a job as a chauffeur or a salesman, which is an excellent experience because we left Chicago in June and went from Chicago to St. Louis, Corpus Christi, Texas, all the way back through down to Tampa up to New York and back – 13 weeks, it was quite an experience. And then that's when I found out really what segregation was. I hadn't been in the South since I was born, but I found out what it was like.

Overy: It was really a shock to you then?

Hervey: Yeah. There were some pretty shaky things that happened on that trip, but --

Overy: Was the salesman a white fellow or...?

[00:05:00]

Hervey: Yes, he was. He was a Russian-Jew who had come over here, his father had brought him over here during the World War I and he was very much aware of what was going on over in Europe and – I got a history lesson every day.

Overy: So then when you went to Tuskegee, it was not a shock to you what the south was like?

Hervey: No. I was well into what the problems were there.

Overy: Why don't you tell me a little bit about that trip? You say you had some hairy experiences as you were...?

Hervey: Oh you mean the chauffeuring trip?

Overy: Yeah.

Hervey: Well, mainly, it was – well, I became aware of what the problems were going to be when I went up to Evanston, Illinois, to pick him up. I went to his hotel, and they said, “Well, I’ll call up and see if he wants to talk to you.” He said, “Hervey, I’m not quite ready yet. Go out and get something to eat and be back here in half hour and we’ll be ready to go.” So I walked out of the hotel and saw a restaurant and walked in and they put me in the kitchen.

Overy: In Evanston?

Hervey: In Evanston, Illinois. So when I had told him about that he said, “Well, you got your feet wet, it’s going to be that way from now on.” So what I would do was drop him off at his hotel, and then I would have to check with the bellman or somebody, you know, “Where do I go?” And he would say, “Well, you go over so and so and Miss so and so. She takes in Pullman porters and travelling salesmen and that sort of thing.” And it was interesting how easily some people get used to things but it was very difficult for me.

We had a situation when we got to **[unintelligible - 00:07:32]**. It’s on a weekend, and there was nothing but navy. And he didn’t have a reservation; he couldn’t get a reservation. So he got on the phone and called a lady that had a resort house out on the beach. She said, “Sure, come on out, we’ll take care of you for the night.”

So on the way out he said, “Look, we’re going in and she’d try to fix us dinner, we’d get up and come here and get back on the road. Now, all you have to do is don’t say anything. I told you he’s Filipino.” [Laughs] I said, “What?” He said, “Just do what I tell you.” So we drive up to the house, and who opens the door but the maid, and I didn’t say anything. I tried not to make eye contact but it was too late. So we went and sat down, had dinner, went upstairs, I had a room, and next morning we got up and took off.

Half way back he says, “I left my glasses.” He weighed about 300 pounds. He said, “I’m not gonna ride back there.” He said, “Drop me off

here and I can do some paperwork, and go get my glasses.” I said, “So, I don’t speak English.” He said, “What the hell! You got your meal, you got your bed – go get the damn glasses.” So I go back, ring the bell and I said, “Mr. Brown forgot his glasses.” “I knew it. You’re gonna get killed. Boy, you’re going to get killed.” [Laughs]

Overy: Seriously said that?

Hervey: Yes, absolutely. So we had another experience when we got to Macon, Georgia. I dropped him off and... at one street where they had the black theatre, the restaurant, a hotel and some stores and right across the street was the Greyhound bus station, so there was a lot traffic there, people going in. And I went into this restaurant, had dinner and then I went to the theatre. All of a sudden the lights came up and MPs came in and said, [00:10:00] “All soldiers from Camp Gordon, fall out in the trucks.” And most of the soldiers, they got up. And the other camp—I forget what the other one was—“You fall out,” and then the rest of the civilians. Then the city police came in, said, “Well, all you niggers, get out of here, go directly home and don’t stop or anything.” And as we came out, the crowd across the street in front of the bus station was like a mob. Well, I just had to go down the street to the hotel, and went in and asked, “What’s going on?”

It seemed as though a black sailor, a soldier, had gotten drunk and the police tried to stop him. He grabbed the gun and shot one of them. So naturally there was buses being informed and everybody who was 70 years old had a stick or something in his hand, and it was really very scary. So I called him in the hotel; he says, "Well, where are you?" I said, "I'm in the hotel." He said "Well, I'm not going to come in there after you, and you can't come over here, so just be cool." Well, I sat up all night watching to see what will happen and the next morning, the army had a jeep with a 50-caliber machine gun on every corner and... people got up and went, going back and forth, you know.

We had determined on the way to Macon that once we crossed over into Alabama, we were going to have to get gas stamps; the 13 states along the coast there had ration gas. We had some gas stamps but we didn't have enough to take us down to Tampa. So I said, "Well, you know what? We have a brand new 1942 Plymouth and a huge truck in it." I said, "I don't know if a 55-gallon drum will fit in that truck back there but if it does, we can attach a petcock to the gas line and we'll have 55 gallons of gas." He said, "Hey! That will work." He said, "Okay, go out and get it done."

So I drove to a gas, I mean, a garage and I walked in. I learned how to approach and I went in and I said, "I'm the driver for a salesman. This is his car and he wants to know if you know anyone who is smart enough to put a tank in the truck and connect it so that we can gallon up. He says, "Yeah, we can do it. Who is going to pay for it?" I said, "He is going to pay for it." He said, "All right."

So they got the tank and they hooked it up, and I went back to get the car, and I was sitting waiting for him to bring the car up. Some guy came up and said, "Hey, nigger." I jumped up. He said, "Not you." He was talking to someone else over there. I said I'm going to get killed down here.

Every time somebody uses that word, I get -- you know.

Well, anyway it worked, we were able to go all the way down to Tampa, and we came back through the -- we got into Virginia, West Virginia. That was interesting. We stopped somewhere up in the mountains for some gas, and people came running out. They were looking at two things: one, they were looking at me, because they hadn't seen any blacks; the other, they were looking at that car with the thing, with the hood over the lights, they had never seen. [Laughs] These are things that stick in your mind down here. [00:15:00]

But anyway by the time I got back, I had a good feeling about what it was like being in the South. And Birmingham, I was there for a weekend and I decided to go to a show to see *Gone with the Wind*. I knew what the

arrangement was but I walked up to get a ticket and I thought they would tell me to go around to the back door that took you upstairs. He said, "Go in and you had to wait in until the others showed up," and as I looked around, I didn't see another brother. I said, "I'm in the wrong place," so I went back to one of the ushers and said, "Where is the manager?" He said, "His office is over there." I said, "I want to see him." And I went in and explained to him and he said, "Well, I'm sorry we don't... blacks don't come in on certain days." So that was that.

Oh, I'm Catholic so I asked the lady I was staying with on Sunday morning and said, "Where is the nearest Catholic Church?" She says, "Now the nearest one is like two blocks away but I don't think that's your church." I said, "That don't make any difference. Church is church." It was 12 o'clock which is the last mass, and as I approached, the usher stopped me and she said, "Your church is over on such and such a street." And I said, "I don't have time to get over there before mass." "That's not my problem. You can't come in here."

So I walked around and went over to the priest's house and waited till the priest came out with his altar boys, and I told him what the problem was. He says "Come on with me." So went in and came up behind the sacristy and he sat me down on a seat, and went through the mass, and as he left he called me back. I went in his office and then he started lecturing me about, you know, "I understand you don't understand but you have to realize..." I said, "Wait a minute. I've had this mass all the time I've been on this trip, and you're telling me that now I got to go looking for a church in order to go to mass?" I said, "I don't have time to be bothered with that. I'll just skip it." He said, "Well, that's up to you. You know what the rules are." So when I got – see, I went to Tuskegee in March.

Overy: 1943?

Hervey: '43. So the first Sunday, I went up to the tac officer and I said I was looking at the list of services but I don't see anything for Catholics, and he says, "Well, I don't know any Catholics but I'll find out." So he came

back and said, "No, they don't have enough priests to come out here, but there will be a 6-by-6 and a driver to take you in to Tuskegee, and the driver will get you there and bring you back." And the driver says, "I don't have to be back till 6:00, so you can do what you want till then." So I had all day on campus on Sunday. When I got there, they wouldn't let -- the new cadets couldn't get off the campus unless it was an emergency.

Overy: So you were actually housed in campus facilities when you were training in Tuskegee?

Hervey: No. We were at the air base. It's about 12 miles away from Tuskegee Institute. So when the guys found out that I got off the base and spent all day on campus, next time we had a bash of chapel hood and after that we had two trucks --

Overy: All of a sudden converted to Catholicism? [Laughter]

Hervey: I should have gotten a medal for that.

Overy: You were mentioning last night that your instructor at Tuskegee were white?

Hervey: Yeah.

Overy: What do you think of the instruction and the instructors there?

Hervey: I thought the instructors -- the instruction, let's put it that way, was -- had no fault with that. But here again I'm sure that anybody that goes into flight training, an instructor is going to say, "You damn son of a bitch, blah-blah-blah," but when they say 'You black son of a bitch,'

Overy: And that's what they used?

Hervey: That made difference. And some did and some didn't. When I got to basic, all the trainees were going into single engine, but when my class came along, they decided to split it into single and twin-engine, and they put me in twin-engine, which teed me off I was ready to quit. And my instructor at that time was a young Jewish fellow from New York. I told him, I said, "Look, I didn't come here to be a bus driver," and he said, "Is there anything you can do?" I said, "No, there is nothing I can do." He said, "Well, I want to talk to you," so he said, "You come on with me.

We got in a plane and we flew off to a little auxiliary field. And we sat under the wing and he told me some things about what he had been going through down there, being Jewish, and he says, "[Fareed], if you're ever going to be anything, move anything by yourself, you have to learn how to accept this thing and make the best of it. Giving up is not going to be the answer." I'll never forget – and he wasn't much older than I was. And so I went on and it made me realize that I had to get my attitude together. One of my roommates, he was a guy from Alabama, big, tall, dark guy, he could 'yes sir, no sir' the way they like it. Most of us from Detroit and Chicago and we didn't come to that very easily.

Overy: That's what I was curious about. The cadets must have been from all over the country.

Hervey: They were.

Overy: What did you learn from these other people? Was this a real important experience for you to talk to black men from all over the country?

Hervey: Well, it was important to me for this reason, and that is, that I had only been to junior college in Chicago. Most of these guys were graduates from the major black colleges and they knew what college life was, they knew... say that you've been walking to the president's office and there was a conference with him, it just amazed me. I had no idea what black was on campus. And they had fraternities, they had their own sports group, they had athletes that were well known, so it was like meeting a new part of your existence. I found out that there is a black society in Atlanta and in Boston, in Virginia, and I mean, it's organized and they were all primarily educational based. If you didn't go to college, you didn't count.

Overy: So there was a hierarchy then in the black community?

Hervey: Absolutely, very much a hierarchy, which I had not been introduced to.

Overy: And this wasn't at all the same in Chicago?

Hervey: Not to that extent, no, because the hierarchy in Chicago was based on a different parameter. It was, how successful are you in your job? And a

school teacher and poor man potter who are up... and there were – some of the guys that I knew that went away to school went to Harvard, went to West Virginia State, went to Hampton. But generally the working class were looking for civil service jobs. That's what we thought was success.

Overy: What kind of things—I know this is a very broad question, vague question—what kinds of things did the cadets talk about? Was there a lot of talk about segregation, discrimination, this kind of thing that you remember?

Hervey: There was always the undertow of fighting with these instructors. [Each] instructor had five students and he was expected to graduate at least two, maybe three. [00:25:00]

So the other two were fighting for survival and at the end of the day we would get together and critique the day, you know, what did he jump on you about and what were you doing? In this way, I believe, and maybe some other factors involved because of this twin-engine training program coming along, but we had the largest graduating class at that point out of Tuskegee. I think we took in 52 and graduated 47, when they were bringing in 30 and 40 and graduating 15 and 20.

But as I said, I think that had a lot to do with the change in twin-engine program; they needed more. But those of us that were in school were very concerned about what was happening to the 99 that was overseas. We were primarily concerned about where we were going from here. The segregation thing was something that as long as you're on the base you didn't have a problem; it's when you got off the base and you decided to get the base and come to Chicago. The minute you got to Montgomery to get on the train, then you had your problems because they didn't recognize you in those cadet uniforms, they were angry about it, and...

Overy: That was one of my questions. What was the reaction of whites?

Hervey: They were very unfriendly.

Overy: Did they make comments or yell at you or anything like that? Were you taunted because --?

Hervey: No, I wouldn't say they went to that extent. But, of course, you had to... you realize that once you were in the segregated part of the train, because in the train you were segregated in there, so here you're among friends and you get good treatment. But the minute you got to Heavensville or wherever they make the change, then you move into the right compartments and then you have to deal with those people.

Overy: I was curious too as to what you did when you were off duty. Did you go into town, did you travel, and the reactions of whites in the south to officer candidates who were black?

Hervey: Well, the white military, in many cases, refused to honor the fact that we had officers, bars and wings; they wouldn't salute. And it depended on where you were; if were walking down a street in Montgomery and a white soldier came by and didn't salute, you could call him down, but what could you do? But if you were on a base, that's different. You pick your times to try and use your influence, but it was always questionable about what we were going to run into.

I remember one of my instructor said, "I will make a stopover in another training field." And he got off the plane, went in to talk to one of his buddies that was based there. I was sitting down next to another cadet and we just started talking about, "Well, how are you making out?" "You know, it's rough." We were both in basic training, you know, and we had no problem.

Overy: He was white?

Hervey: He was white and we were fighting. The big problem was that airplane. I found that usually pilots don't give you a problem once they recognize that you're doing the same thing they are. But that doesn't always work, because when I was in the Godman, we had a call from Fort Knox. A white nurse who had an emergency had a death in the family. So they called over to ask if we could drop her off to Dayton. [00:30:00]

So they put her on my ship and we flew into Dayton and I called in and asked for transportation. And as we drove up to the operations office, the

whole place was filled with guys filing up forms and everything; it just got quiet. And she shook hands and said, "Thank you for the help," and went her way. And I'm filling up my paper and they're just staring. Nobody said "hello, how are you?" And these are guys that had been overseas and were flying wounded back. And that was their first stop at Dayton. They didn't know that there were blacks in the Air Corps, so it was...

We went down to an airbase in California, where they were training night fighters. They were flying a P61 Black Widow. They turned on the runway lights and all of the doors had little red lights outside and you walked in a cubicle, close that door and then you could open the other. We had run into some bad weather and there were two ships and six people on each ship. And when we walked in, they just said, "My God! They're coming to take our jobs." What are they talking about? Then one of them probably said, "Well, they already told us that you guys see better in the dark than anybody." [Laughter] And I believed it.

Overy: Was your training dangerous?

Hervey: No. I think the only time, I was in flying and training; we lost one guy in my class. Now once they got up into the combat training, then it got a little more dangerous. But I don't recall any... we had a couple of accidents on the field and got through into the bridge at night. But, no, I wouldn't say it was that dangerous. The fact they're training so many pilots, you know, there's a certain amount of accidents. But our training was very good; it was very good. I think one of the reasons that we were as successful as we were was that they didn't have any place for us to go, so we got more flying time than the average pattern. The average pattern, when he finished his combat training in whatever plane it was, he had 60 flying hours, and he is on it overseas. We flew around for weeks and months. I had, by the time the 477 was ready to go to combat, I had over 800 hours flying that airplane, because I had been flying it for two years.

Overy: Explain what you said because you had nowhere to go. So what do you mean by this specifically?

Hervey: Well, the bomber group started from scratch and I was in the first class. When I finished the B25 transition school, the bomber unit was at Selfridge Field, Michigan, and that's where it was going to start. They had five airplanes and they had to build a bomber group, which is four squadrons, 16 planes each, two crews, two planes, six men to a crew. So here are 26 guys and five airplanes, up there in March of '44, and we weren't ready to go until May of '45, and all that time we were flying and flying. We would take the guys who had just come out of school. They set the first ones after this transition school but after a while, the minute they graduated from Tuskegee, they sent them to us and we trained our co-pilots. We became their instructors and...

Overy: Formation flying and things of this kind? [00:35:00]

Hervey: That's right.

Overy: Were conditions in -- so you were based in Michigan?

Hervey: We were based in Michigan for about three months, then we got into this hustle with the officers' club, they shipped us down to Fort Knox Kentucky.

Overy: Would you -- maybe you're telling about that last one, would you put it on tape for me please?

Hervey: There is an officers' club on every base, and the army regulation says that it's for the use of all residing officers or transits. They did not want us in the officers' club, so they designated the training unit, which is everybody that was there training to become a member of the 477 or the 332nd because they still had some fighter trainers that were designated as trainees and therefore their officers' club was in such and such a building. So we fought that and said, "No, that's not the way it's supposed to be," and they went into the officers' club anyway and then they put a military guard out there and they got some authorization to build a separate club for us, and that's when we got on the horn and called Washington and

called the *Pittsburg Courier* and the *Chicago Defender*. And they decided to move us – since this was in Detroit right after the time they had had the riots, they decided to get us out of there.

Overy: In '43 they had the riots, I remember.

Hervey: Yeah, we were there in '44. So they moved us down to Godman Field and we had a... there is an airbase right next to the tank base there.

Overy: What field was that?

Hervey: Godman, Fort Knox, I said Fort Knox. So we trained at Godman and we had our own club because there was nobody else on it. The white officers didn't stay on our base; they stayed over at Fort Knox. So they went to the Fort Knox Club and we had our own club until the unit started getting too large. I guess we had two squadrons there. By the time they were ready to make it a fourth squadron, they moved us up to Freeman Field which is Seymour, Indiana, which was a larger base. Okay, the same thing happened there. The first thing that happened was that the women started saying that they couldn't go in town and try on a dress **[unintelligible - 00:37:51]**.

Overy: So your wife was with you?

Hervey: Yeah. And so we said, "Well, we'll have to have a word with the mayor," and we pointed out to him that the payroll on this base is a million dollars a month.

Overy: This was in what town again?

Hervey: Seymour, Indiana. And "Make up your mind. We're going to spend this money either in St. Louis or Louisville or Detroit or Chicago or wherever. And they decided that they could make some changes **[unintelligible -00:38:27]**. But the situation came up about these officers' club again, and they designated certain buildings as training buildings, of which the officers' club was not one, and they put this order out that you were supposed to read and sign that you have read and understood that you'll only go into these certain buildings. Well, these people were the

first ones that got the order and they refused so they put them under arrest.

Overy: So you were essentially confined to quarters?

Hervey: They actually flew them off the base and sent them back to Godman Field, and they turned Godman Field into... they didn't have barbed wire around it, but they were confined there, the barracks over there, officers. That's when they brought General Davis back from Europe. He came in to Godman and took over the 477 and getting them ready to go over to the Pacific. [00:40:00]

Overy: Did your wife pretty much travel with you wherever you were stationed?

Hervey: Yeah, she did. But that was one of the reasons I got out, because she was not enamored with the military at all. That was not her style, and there is no way that you can progress in the military if your wife is anti. She's got to be behind you at all times. So I decided that I would get out and go back to school and try and learn something.

Another story that was very interesting, we had one fellow who was from Pocatello, Idaho. And he says that there were three families in Idaho – no, there were four families in Idaho. He had met three of them. Then when they pulled out the exam for the Air Corps, the other friends from school went and took it and they all passed it. They went somewhere, and he came to Tuskegee. Well, you talk about culture shock; he had never seen that many blacks in his life. He didn't understand the body language, he did not understand the idioms, he didn't – he was just like being in a brand new country. So that was something that he had to come through. And he learned fast. He became one of the raunchiest ones of all once he... [Laughs]

Overy: Did you have much contact with white officers? Was your unit that much contained and separated from white units?

Hervey: Yeah. Even the 99th, which was the first squadron that went into combat, they were attached to a white unit but they were sitting over on another base by themselves. And the fellas tell me that no one came over and

offered any help. They said the most interesting thing ever happened was when a white officer came over to their base and sat down and just talked to them about what it was like up there. He said they learned more in eight hours than they had the whole time they had been overseas. But they had no one in the unit to tell them, so they would all read it out of books; that's a lot of difference.

Overy: Who was your squadron commander?

Hervey: At that time, it was Colonel B.O. Davis, Junior.

Overy: I didn't realize that he was a flier somehow.

Hervey: B.O. Davis was a West Point graduate and his intention was to become a pilot. He was in West Point in '35 but graduated in '36. He asked for pilot training and they said his -- I wish you could see that film that I have. I have one that brings all of this out. He was the first black to graduate from West Point in 47 years, and the reason there were other blacks that went, but they were put on the silent treatment, because we had three or four guys in our group that had been in West Point for six months, a year maybe but they couldn't hack it. But Davis hacked it for four years; none of his classmates ever spoke to him. When you put all that together, you can understand that he was determined that this was going to work. This is the first class, first five that graduated, and he was one of them.

Overy: As you were going through all this, did you ever regret that you joined the military and that you hadn't left home? [00:45:00]

Hervey: No. I was hooked on flying, and anything that had to do with flying was what I was prima -- I used to play the violin. I gave that up. I gave up everything because this was the thing that I wanted to do. And my father had been in the Navy in World War I, I had an uncle who spent about 14 years in the Navy, and I would have gone that way probably except for the fact that the war broke out and the navy wasn't taking any blacks. I got this CPT program, so that was the only way for me.

Overy: Did you have any close calls when you were flying? Formation flying can be pretty dangerous.

Hervey: I had a few which -- none of which resulted in anything serious. But one incident I remember, I had a new copilot and we had our full load of practice bombs that weighed 100 pounds each. We had 12 practice bombs in our crew. Then some of the fellows were being transferred from Godman over to Freeman. We took about three passengers in the back and went to take off. Well, his job is to run the flats down.

Overy: Was it by hand?

Hervey: No, it's hydraulic. He was supposed to run the flats down and then run them back up. And then I tell him how many degrees flat I wanted; with all of this weight on, I didn't want but half flats. The runway that we were taking off took off right over Fort Knox where the gold is --/AT/ee

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PART TWO

Overy: So there you're heading right towards Fort Knox.

Hervey: Here we go. We're going down the runway and I realized I'm trying to pull the stick back and I got no reaction and drives down and see he's got full flats down. By this time, we're just getting barely getting off the ground and he realized what was happening. He reached for the flat handle and I had to grab his handle because if he had pulled up the flat at that time, we would've... we would've gone on all of us. [Laughter] So all we could do was just struggle out and just barely get over that to Fort Knox until we got enough altitude to gradually [suck] the flats off and gain air speed. That's one thing.

Another thing there was a period that – I think in about one week, my wife was not on the base. She was home, having our daughter.

Overy: Now she is back in Chicago?

Hervey: No. She was in Providence, Rhode Island. Anyway, so I'm on the base, and whenever the maintenance department had a ship that was finished, somebody had to come down and check it out, you know, so I volunteered to do that and everything else to do. So for about three days out of a week, one day I took off and the strap on my parachute evidently got caught in the hook or the escape hatch. And just as we got off the ground, shoot, there goes the escape hatch, you know – didn't hit the tail, thank goodness.

Another trip was, we got out and I heard this noise. There's nobody in the back now, just pilot, co-pilot and the engineer. I heard this noise and I said to the engineer, "Go back and see what's going on back there." The life raft was bouncing around on a rope out there. Those are the things. And the third one was I think I got the main wheels down but

couldn't get the nose wheel down. They do have a crank where you can go and crank that down. So after about three episodes like that, I said, "Look, get somebody else. I want to rest a while."

Overy: Did you have pretty much the same crew the whole time or...?

Hervey: After I got my own ship assigned to me, then I had my own crew. I had them to stay with me until we got out.

Overy: What was the relationship like in the crew? You said they were six people in B25?

Hervey: Right, pilot, copilot and the navigator, and then the....

Overy: They're pretty much your family?

Hervey: And then the other enlisted men. In some cases, it was very tight. In others, it depended on, you know, one of the fellows in my crew never got up on Sunday, stayed in bed and read all the newspapers and books, you know, so he wasn't any fun. [Laughter] But the engineer and the tail gunner were from St. Louis. I kept up with them for two to three years after the war and then I don't know what happened to them. The radio gunner, who was the youngest guy on the crew, was from Boston. And we had more problems with Hector, Francis I. Hector—we called him Fussy—because he was always getting into trouble doing something, you know, and when he and I became very close friends, he was one of background supporters of the New England chapter of Tuskegee Airmen. He's been president. He came out and became... he worked for a distillery, salesman. He was one of my good buddies. [00:05:00]

Overy: You said you did not want to go to the bombers. Did you end up thinking it was not so bad after all?

Hervey: Well, I didn't see any opportunity to do anything else other than fighter pilot training. However, now when the war was over and they were downgrading, they took two of the bomber squadrons and one of the fighter squadron and put them together and made a composite group, which meant that for about a year, I guess, they operated that way and then they made them a fighter group again, and the bomber guys had to

go in for fighter training, and they did. And, of course, many of the single-engine guys, when they came back they went into an engine training and some of them became instructors.

Overy: Did you develop a [unintelligible - 0:06:06] for your airplane?

Hervey: Oh, no. We had the B25 J model, which was a brand new at the time that we got it. It was the first one that had fifteen guns on it. They had already determined that its usefulness was not as a medium bomber anymore; it was more as an attack bomber. And when they told us we were going to the Pacific, they said, "Well, you don't need to board the northern bomb side anymore because you're going to go in skip bombing and dive bombing and [stray ping], that sort of thing, so they had four guns on the side that the pilot could fire.

Overy: Where were they located on: on the fuselage, on the wing?

Hervey: On the fuselage. The navigator had the 50-caliber in the nose. The engineer had a turret, twin turret on the top. The radio gunner had one on each side, and he went back and forth too. And the tail gunner had twin. So that was the oddest thing going at that time.

Overy: So I think we found that the four-engine, the heavy bombers were probably more useful, weren't they? The heavier bomb loads and...

Hervey: Oh, yeah, they were – they could carry the biggest loads. Here it is here. Those are the two on each side, two here and two on the other side, and the there's two on this turret, two on the back turret. There's window, and the radio operator, he fired from this window or the other window on the other side.

Overy: I'm going to be sure and take down a notation about this book. I don't think we have it in our library.

Hervey: Don't you?

Overy: I'm sure we don't.

Hervey: I can have one mailed to you.

Overy: Okay. I will pay you for it.

Hervey: Okay.

Overy: Well, let's see. You've been talking about problems that you had in the military and with whites and instructors and all the rest. Did you have a concept of the enemy, you know, the Japanese, the Germans? Did you wonder what you were fighting for, if you were fighting them? I'm putting this very clumsily. Have you wondered why black people were fighting in this war because of the kind of things you've gone through at home?

Hervey: Well, we recognize that this was the only way that we were going to be able to prove that we were good as anybody else. At that time you couldn't do it on a baseball, you couldn't do in football; you couldn't do in corporate office. So this was the first chance that our generation had to prove. And although there had been foot soldiers in all the wars, this was technology. [00:10:00]

And this would prove that you had a mind that was able to function as well as anybody's. And after the war was over, things began to change rapidly, and I'm sure that the attitude, once they integrated the Air Force, the attitudes changed almost overnight. Hard-nosed guys just would not accept it, but when I got out, I joined the reserves at O'Hare, and the first two-week tour we did up there, we did it in that big hangar where they used to build the C54s – had 3,000 reservists and on cuts in that hangar. And they were from Michigan, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois; one of them came from Minnesota. But within two weeks' time, we had established for them that we were as good pilots, and sometimes better than they, and they accepted this.

By the time they were ready to send that—it was a troop carrier unit—they were ready to send it overseas. Most of the black fellows who had come out to see what was going on either decided they didn't want to stay and got out. The ones that stayed, they were ready to go.

Overy: Did you feel that yours was a special responsibility? In other words, it was not only fulfilling your own desires as a pilot, as an officer, but that you had a responsibility to other black people, to show that you were as

good as anybody else. Did you feel that kind of responsibility that you were representing all these bunch of people?

Hervey: Absolutely. I mean, it comes from the need. They've always – mother, dad, grandmother, aunt, whoever, “You got to be better in order to make it.” Oprah used to say, “There are enough half-ass white people out there that they have to deal with. They don't have to deal with any half-ass black people.” [Laughter] So, yes, you had a responsibility to yourself to get above the pack, because most black people were poor and uneducated, so you do it personally for yourself. Then you realize that now you've got a responsibility to show everybody else that you are as good as they are.

It's something that's going to always be there. I don't think that there is ever going to be a time when a black person will say, “I got it made, I don't have to worry, I'm a good old boy like the rest of them.” Not true, not true. There's always that feeling that I don't care how close you get, there's a respect up to a point and it can be cut off at any time.

Overy: So you never permanently made it?

Hervey: Yeah. Now there are exceptions to everything. I know some people who have friends that they have considered like brothers and sisters because that's just the way they regard each other. And I don't try to categorize everybody into any one category. [00:15:00]

One of the newspaper – no, the television people that -- two acts last week asked me, “What do you think about the sex issue in the military?” So I said, “Well, are you asking me personally or are you asking what does the Tuskegee government think about it, because if you are asking the Tuskegee government, if you had asked this question back in 1943, they would have said, ‘Hell, no!’ I think that was the only answer.” I said, “But now we have to realize they were saying do you want blacks in the Air Force and they were saying, ‘Hell, no.’ So we have to take an attitude that the military can work this thing out, and it will work.’

Overy: What effects do you think your military service had on you as a man?
Do you think it had a positive impact, a negative impact?

Hervey: I personally think it was very positive for me. I know the fellows have different attitudes, but I think generally the fellows who consider themselves as originators of the idea that blacks are as good as anybody else and proved it, they think that this was the best thing that ever happened. And they just used this experience through their lives to build on, and now they are proving in other ways that they can do anything if you put your mind to it. All you have to do is get the opportunity and it will work.

Overy: Do you think -- did the military service have any negative influences that you can think of? Was there anything that you regret from those years in the military?

Hervey: Not that I can pinpoint. Once I have decided that I was going to go back to school, I just about realized that my main interest was not in the military; it was in flying. Because I tried to get into the airlines and here again we're starting from square one. When I went down to the Steven's Hotel to answer an ad, there were 800 ex-Air Force pilots there. And they lectured for about two hours and they said, "Now go to lunch and when you come back you got a four exam to take." I walked up to the guys and said, "I'm not concerned about your exam, but if I pass it, do I get a job?" He said, "Are you colored?" I said, "Yes." He said, "No." So it was as simple as that, and that was in '46, and the first black pilot didn't get hired till in the '50s. Finally, United sent word that they would consider any person who could meet certain qualifications. And the one qualification we couldn't beat was 'under 35 years old,' because all of us were old by that time.

Overy: I often hear, for example, students, not to move black students on campus but in numbers -- and they certainly suffered discriminations, no question about it. But do you think in your lifetime things have improved?

Hervey: Well, superficially. I mean, when you go back to white and colored water fountains, and 'you can't eat here', 'you can't go to that hotel', and you can't -- yes. [00:20:00]

All that does is make it possible for you to spend your money where everybody else spends theirs, but that's not a hell of an accomplishment. That's just writing a negative that has been asinine in the first place. But you still have to do whatever is necessary to get on the dean's list and to join the groups that you want to join and get into the type of work that you want to do.

It's still a problem. There's -- whether they will admit it or not, there is still a quota system. And I will say this that I believe that it is -- I think it is possible that in some instances, integration has destroyed the initiative of some blacks because they accept the attitude, "Well, I don't have to try any harder than anybody else," and that's not true.

Overy: So you think it's slowed them, that kind of false security?

Hervey: That's right.

Overy: I never heard that feeling expressed before.

Hervey: Well, I think if you ever paid a trip to any of the black colleges and listened to the way they're motivating their students, they're telling them "Your education is just as good as anybody else's but you got to get out there and do a better job." There is a lot to be said about the way these public school systems have allowed the integration process to destroy the standards of the school. And in a city like Chicago where you have a school district that's as large as Minneapolis that's all black and the caliber of students they are putting out is not up to par.

There is another school district that is Hispanic, and there is another school district that's white, and there are differences in each of them. And I think until we recognize that our workforce is going to be made up of not white males, it's going to be made up of females and minorities, the techniques have to change. They have to change./AT/ee