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INTERVIEWEE: Garth Reeves

INTERVIEWER: Unknown 1, Unknown 2, and Unknown 3

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Unknown: --and I am at William H. Turner Technical Arts studio on March 2, 2006 to interview Garth Reeves about his personal history. Describe when and where were you born and a bit about your parents and grandparents.

Reeves: Well, I was born in Nassau, Bahamas. And four months after my birth, my parents decided to move to Miami. So, I've been around since 1919 which is-- I celebrated my eighty-seventh birthday last month. And I've been-- I grew up here. I went to Booker T. Washington High School. I had four sisters who also went there and grew up here. And we all went to college and got degrees. My sisters got advanced degrees, I didn't get any further than a B.S., but the rest is history. I've been around here all my life except the four years I spent in the United States Army from 1942 to '46.

U: What was it like growing up where you did? Describe what your community was like when you were a child? What neighborhood did you live in and what was around? What places did you go as a child and was it segregated?

R: Well, believe it or not--

[indistinct chatter]

R: -- [laughs] That's a long question. [laughs] But that's alright, I'll-- growing up here in Miami, things were pretty tough but we didn't have television and so we didn't know really, about all the things that happened in the outside world. And I guess that was the secret of our parents because our-- most of our parents were dirt-poor but they acted like they were rich or like we were not missing anything and they thought that-- they made us feel that we were blessed to be here and to have an opportunity, as limited as it was. And so not knowing all these other things existed during the time, we felt pretty good about ourselves. We had our own neighborhood, which was Overtown, and we all lived among ourselves, all our schools were segregated and all the-- all the entertainment places. And we sort-of got along and didn't worry about a lot of things. We had unpleasanties, but we kind of grew used to the segregated pattern of life because to resist it, you always lost, you were always out-numbered, and you did not understand a lot of the things that happened nor did you go along with things that were denied you. But your parents were always there to remind you that don't rock the boat, don't get in trouble. And we grew up sort-of a-- I remember when I went into the Army, my mother told me, "Learn to be-- just learn to stay alive, learn to come back home, and then you can do something about these things that you complain about now." And I guess we learned to be people who-- who could exist, who could manage to stay alive, despite the disparities of the day.

U1: If you knew that the U.S. Army was segregated, what made you decide to join?

R: The Army?

U: Yeah. If you knew it was segregated, why--?

R: Well, I really didn't decide to join. They-- you know, we had the draft during that time. And I had just come out of college and I was working with my father in the

newspaper business and printing. And we were doing pretty good and then I remember I was coming back from Orlando where we had attended the Orange Blossom Classic in December 1941. And when I got home, my dad rushed out to the car and said the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. And I said, "Who the hell is Pearl Harbor?"

[audience laughs]

R: And I really knew-- I never knew the place existed before. And we found out we were at war. And that was in December 1941. Two months later- in February 1942- I was in the Army. And they did it by a draft; they pulled your numbers out of a lottery in those days to see who would go to the Army first-- or, not the Army, the Armed Forces. And my name must have been number one because they got me as soon as they started the lottery, my name popped out of there and I had to go down and-- to the draft board and I really didn't want to go service because I was-- I really tried to get in the Air Force earlier in 1941 before the war started and during the-- everything was segregated during that time. But I had read about the Tuskegee Airmen and they had started this program and I said well maybe I could get into that and wouldn't have to have all the indignities that I met with after I got into the Army. But, it didn't work out and I got all my letters in-- my letters of recommendation. I had people in the community to write good reports on me but before I could get accepted into the Air Force, I was drafted into the United States Army. I went into the Army in February 1942 and by April 1942, I was on the *Queen Elizabeth* headed for England- overseas. It happened so fast, but the war was heating up then and the sub-- the German submarines were playing games with us off the-- right off the coast of the Atlantic coast. I mean, you might remember the history that they sank ships not very far from Miami and Palm Beach and those areas. And I think

that's the reason we went overseas so fast: they needed men, they needed men fast, they needed troops. And as soon as we were trained in-- I went to Mississippi for training. And as soon as we were trained, they put us on a boat and shipped us overseas. And I remember I was very uncomfortable in going overseas because I knew the U-boats- the German U-boats- were sinking a lot of ships and we went on the *Queen Elizabeth* with no convoy. You know what a convoy is? They take all the ships together and put the battleships and the destroyers around it to protect it. Well, we were out there in the Atlantic alone, nobody but *Queen Elizabeth*. And I was quite concerned but they told me that we were traveling so fast, U-boats could not keep up with us. I said, "Well, I hope that's true." Anyhow, we got to England in seven days, we got to-- it wasn't England, Scotland, that's where we landed- Greenock, Scotland. And that's where, even on down into England, I started my overseas career there. I stayed overseas, oh, maybe eight months and I was shipped back to the States to study-- to go to Officer's Candidates School. I was a technical sergeant at the time and I wanted to go back to Anti-Aircraft School in the States. So I put in my application for Officer School and I was accepted and I was shipped back to a camp- Fort Belvoir, Virginia. And when I got off the plane that night, a black sergeant met me and looked at my papers, he said, "Are you sure you're in the right place?" I said, "Well, this is where they sent me. Here are the papers." And he told me, he said, "That's funny, we've never had a black in this school as long as I've been here and I've been here twenty-two years. We've never had a black to study-- to be an officer in this school." I said, "Look, you looking at my papers so let's go." So he took me to the camp. It was at night and they gave me a room. And the next morning, they had cut my papers to move me to out of there. The (sergeant?) knew what he was talking

about because they said it was a big mistake and I was not supposed to be there. Well, that was the first discrimination I came up with and-- so, they sent me to a camp down at Camp Davis, North Carolina where an Anti-Aircraft Artillery School-- [audio cuts] --for officer's training. Well, I was pretty disturbed by that but what can you do? You went along. Anyhow, I finished the course, but I didn't graduate. I got my uniform and everything-- [audio cuts] --number and all but at the last minute, I was yanked out of the class. I never found out about it, but it wasn't too bad because I found out later a lot of the guys who finished in my class had gone overseas, a lot of them didn't come back. So, sometimes things happen for the best, sometimes discrimination works in your favor.

Unknown2: Mr. Reeves, how were the colored enlisted trainees treated in the camps?

R: Well, not very good. We-- they never let you forget you were black. They always let you know because I was in the 383<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Battalion. We could build bridges and a lot of things. We built roads, we were a pretty good (outfit?) but actually, when we got overseas, we were more doing more work details. We didn't really-- they hadn't invaded France at the time and we were sort of biting our time. And they didn't ask us really to do a lot of-- a lot of things. They didn't-- I could see that they were not gonna put us into combat, they didn't want us to fight. They didn't think we were smart enough really to fight. And they-- and so, I didn't worry about it, I was having a good time in England. I remember my mother going over-- my mother told my-- we had a lot of problems when I was young of black men getting lynched and normally it was for-- a black man was supposed to have insulted a white man or had done -- had assaulted white woman or-- it was something, but anything that came up, there were all sorts of reasons to be lynched. And my mother was afraid of that, she was saying, "For god's sake, leave those white

women alone.” I said, “Well, mom, you don’t ever see me follow white women. Why do you think I’m in--” She said, “No, but I’m just warning you because that’s the only way you seem to get in trouble here. The people seem to--” And then when I got to England, there were no black women and the white women were-- they didn’t bother about my color at all and I had a good time, we had--

[audience laughs]

R: But I didn’t let that-- when I got back home, I remembered what my mother told me, “You’re still black.” And I never-- [laughs] I always thought that you as an aside-- I was never enthused about white women because among the black race, you have all women, all colors from white to black to any color you want. And I never saw the reason that I had to chase behind a white woman. It was nothing against them and all that, but that’s the way I felt. But, that was another thing back in Miami , you just remember that discrimination still existed and although you had gone overseas and you had gone and fought in the war for a total of-- I was in the Army for forty-six months, but when I came back home, nothing had changed, everything was just the same. I still had to go to the-- we still went to the black theater, we still sent to the black clubs, all our kids still went to the black schools, and it was just-- we went along with the program. Things are a lot different today and I applaud you kids for taking advantage of all the things-- all the opportunities we missed during that time.

U2: Mr. Reeves, did you have transportation to and from training camp?

R: Did I have what?

U2: Transportation to and from your training camp?

R: Confrontations?

U2: Transportations. Transportations!

R: Transportation to and from--?

U2: Your training Army camps.

R: I don't quite understand your question.

U2: How did you get to your training Army camps?

R: In the camp? Oh, we had white officers, all my officers were white in training. Yeah, but no black officers, except one who was the chaplain and they did all the training. We had-- the 383<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Battalion was about 1100 men, but all the men were black and all the officers were white.

Unknown3: Being a black man in the war, were you patriotic? Were you patriotic?

R: Patriotic? As well as I could be. I still have something today against flying the American flag on a flag pole. I always saluted it and I respected it and I stood up at the Star-Spangled Banner. But in my home, I have a twenty-five foot flag pole on my pool deck where the boat is and I never ran up the American flag on my pole. I always ran up the-- one time I had Mandela's flag and one time I had the flag of the Bahamas where I was born, but there's something that always kept me from running that American flag up the pole because although I resented the way I was treated, I respected it, but not to the point where I would be rah-rah guy for the American flag. I didn't wave the flag. I respected it, but I didn't wave it.

U1: What memory-- what vivid memory of the war do you remember the most that you won't ever forget?

R: I think the worst part was I was in the camp where after they had captured a lot of soldiers- Italians soldiers, German soldiers- overseas and they were-- a lot of them were

shipped back to the United States and many of them were incarcerated at the camps where the American soldiers were. The American soldiers were the guards and they kept them in check and all that, but at one camp, I saw-- we couldn't go into the PX, the PX was the post exchange where you bought beer and things like that. We had our own post exchange and it was for the blacks. But believe it or not, the prisoners of war from Italy were using in the white post exchange. Now, I could not understand that, but-- here are the prisoners once we were fighting against, the enemy was getting more rights to be white. And I thought that was very strange and that was something that I couldn't live with but what could you do about it? Nothing.

U2: Mr. Reeve, what was your first assignment in the war and how did you feel?

R: Well, I was the personnel sergeant major of my battalion where I was in the headquarters company and that was a pretty good job because I kept all the records and the way I got there-- because when I first went in the Army, everybody was new and they didn't know what to do and the captain came out one day and said, "Anybody in here can type?" And my hand went up and he wanted-- he got me and said, "Look, we got a lot of things to do. We're getting ready to go overseas and we got a lot of records that need to be filled out and I need somebody to keep the records, the type and all that." He said, "If you work with me, I'll take care of you." So I spent a lot of time with him and helped him get his records right and-- [audio cuts] --all that and sure enough, he made me a corporal. And at the end, before-- three months later, I was a technical sergeant because I had mastered all of his training manuals and I knew what to do and I was getting it done. And so, I became a five star soldier-- five stripe soldier. A technical sergeant was a pretty good rank, that was just one strike below the master sergeant and the first sergeant. So I



had a pretty good-- I had a pretty good deal and I think I got a lot of privileges because I had gone to college and a lot of the guys I had gone into the service with were not as educated. And I thought the more education you had, I think the higher you got.

U3: Mr. Reeves, what was the atmosphere in the training camps?

R: Well, all of us were there together, although the-- I trained with a bunch of men from New York, Philadelphia, and Boston and they were much more out-spoken than I was because I was from the deep south and I knew my place down in the deep south. But these guys talked-- but they had to do the same thing, they had to swallow their pride and accept all these-- this discriminatory tactics that were placed in their way, the same as I did. Nobody liked it, but nobody did anything-- nobody could do anything about it. So, I had a pretty good deal when I was always-- I liked being inside, especially when the weather's bad and you have to go out in the snow to (soldier?). So, I always had a pretty good deal.

U3: What did your family think about you being part of the war? What did your family think about you being a part of the war?

R: Well, my mother, she didn't-- she knew I didn't want to go into the service because I didn't have my heart into it and she just said, "Be a survivor. Learn to be a survivor. Don't try to win the war by yourself. Try to come back home safely." And with that attitude, I think she helped me through a lot of trying times, a lot of trying times.

U1: When you came back from the war--

R: Yes?

U1: Um, how were you treated in South Florida?

R: Everything was the same, but-- Miami was-- seemed to be a little different then. We were still locked down in Overtown and-- but I don't know, Miami was-- I thought about all the good times I had down on Second Avenue, the clubs we went to, we had the big bands to come to town, and I started-- you know, I was not worried about-- people were worried so much about the integration. As long as I had a fair shot at being-- at being able to enjoy myself, I don't have to be with a white person's company. I had-- it was a strange thing. You didn't want to accept segregation, but you wondered-- now, when I came-- when I was in the Army, I went to a lot of places and I came back home and I thought-- I talked to my mother, I said, "I think I'm leaving town." And she said, "Why?" I said, "I've been in a lot of big places, a lot of places I like a lot better than Miami." She said, "Name a few." So I said, "Chicago, I like New York, I like Seattle, Washington, I like New Orleans," I said, "Pretty women in New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., and New York." And I named all these places and she said, "Well, I'll tell you what: I want you to stay home because your father has a business here and I think he wants you. He would be disappointed if you left home." And she said, "But let me tell you, anywhere you go today in this country, you're going to find prejudice and discrimination." I say-- she said, "You might go places like New York and Boston where you can ride in the front of the bus and go to any theater or any restaurant you want, but you will find that you will be segregated the same way once they see the color of your skin." And I thought about that a long time, but I had run upon-- I had seen segregation in places I didn't think it would be like Washington, D.C. was very segregated. That was not one of the places I would have gone but my wife was there, my first wife was living in Washington and I thought she wanted me to come there and she thought it would be much better. But

anyhow, I stayed home and I'm glad I did, because it changed my mindset. My mother said, "Why run away from what you don't like? Why don't you stay here and do something about it?" So I said, "What can I do?" She said, "You can make changes. Make changes. If you don't like it, say so. Your daddy's got a newspaper, use that." And she kind of kindled something in my mind about using the press in order to fight your battles instead of with guns and sticks. And at that time, I got interested in the newspaper business. Before that, my father had a printing place in two parts: he had a newspaper in one part and then he had commercial job printing in the other part and I always worked in the commercial job printing because that's where the money was. They paid plenty money there, but in the newspaper, it was very difficult because advertising-- white people did not advertise with us, we got a few adv-- advertisements from the black community, but that's why I stayed over in the job department. And then when my mother told me to use the newspaper, I moved over and started writing articles about discrimination and prejudice. At that time, the main thing was really-- it was still lynching and discrimination and segregation, and that's what we talked about. We pointed it out to the people. You might not be able to do anything about it, but at least we want you to know about it that what you're doing is wrong and it should be corrected and I think that our newspaper did a good job because the *Miami Herald* and the *Miami Daily News*, which was publisher at that time, was not gung-ho about the civil rights of black people. They didn't publish anything much about the civil rights of black people. They didn't publish anything much about protests. They published the news and it kind of went along with everybody else; it's a status-quo. But the *Miami Times* was always there talking about the segregated patterns and why are the black schools so different from the

white schools? Why have the white schools got more facilities than the black schools? And we thought it was very important to keep hammering those things home, and we stayed on it, we stayed on that all the time. We kept pointing out the inequities of the system which were many and I think today, a lot of people have benefited by our protest and we were strong in that. We took part in all the protest movements, all the Civil Rights Movements; we were represented all the time. We brought the news as it was, we didn't print just what any other-- any person other than us wanted to say, but we tried to bring the news as it happened and tell the truth, tell it as it was. And I think that's one of our legacies today that we hung in there.

U2: Did you print anything on the war?

R: On the war? Yes. Well, the war still went on after we-- after-- of course, it ended-- when I got out, the war had ended because I remember I was on a ship going to Pearl Harbor. Believe it or not, the second-- when the war in Europe ended and we were going over there to train for the invasion of Japan because we had won the war in Germany at that time. So our (lights?)-- our focus was on Japan and we were-- I was in the regimen then and we went to Japan and started training for the invasion. I did not like that idea of invading Japan because I had read the intelligence reports that we were getting that we were looking to lose two million casualties. That was what the intelligence told us, that we got to look to lose two million-- I said two million casualties? That's a lot of people. And they said the Japanese was stubborn people, they would fight 'til the end and it would not be an easy task but the only way we would complete-- completely win the war was to defeat the Japanese. And while we were training, you know what happened: they decided to drop the bomb, and that turned the war around. Good or bad, the atomic bomb

is what ended the war because it rained so much destruction down on Japan that they gave up, I think, in a week or two and then that's how we ended the war. I don't know if introducing the atomic bomb to the world was good or bad, we have yet to find out about it.

U2: How do you feel about the atomic bomb?

Unknown4: Um, could you pause it for a second?

[indistinct chatter]

U1: What were some of the countries you visited while being in a war?

U4: QE2.

R: Well, we sailed on the QE2 in August of '42. Seven days later, we landed in Greenock, Scotland. We came down and we were based in-- in England at Derbyshire-Derby, England. And we stayed there, I imagine-- [audio cuts] --of the time, most of the time, we were training, supposedly training and I imagine, for the war, but we were doing mainly maintenance work and quartermaster work and things like that. We-- not a lot of combat training and things like that. So I think we were being used basically more like a quartermaster corp.- a service group- because they still did not have black fighting men then. Now, something happened while I was in England. A lot of people were getting killed and they were all white seemingly because blacks were not fighting. Well, if you were not in the ranks up front, you were pretty safe. So, they got the bright idea: well, why don't we get some blacks killed, too? So, let them fight. So, at-- they actually passed a law, they said, "If anybody wanted to fight, they could volunteer and they could get in a combat unit." But they had a couple of tricks to it. If you wanted to fight, if you wanted to go in a combat unit, you had to give up all your rank. That means you were back to a

private again. Well I was a technical sergeant, so I said, "Gee, I wonder why they would have it so stringent." If they really wanted you in a the combat until, they would absorb your rank with it, but they did not, they said, "No, if you want to be in a combat unit, you would have--" But most of the people said, "Listen, I wasn't good enough to fight when you brought me here, I'll stay right here and do what I'm doing now and thanks but no thanks." And I felt the same way, I felt the same way. I said, "Well why now that they're-- now that the white boys are getting killed you want to get us over there now?" So, you know-- but then, why make it so tough by taking our rank? That wasn't very smart, but that's the way they did it. Now, when I left England, I came back to the United States where I found out that at Fort Belvoir, Virginia that we talked about, and ended up washing out of school at the coastal artillery. After that, I went to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. From there, we shipped to-- that's when I was on the QE-- not the QE2 going to-- when the war ended in Germany, we were on the way to Pearl Harbor and we landed in Pearl Harbor and began training for the invasion of Japan and before we ended our training there, the war in Japan ended. Now, that's the chronologic of (?). I didn't-- I never went into combat anywhere, anywhere. All-- I stayed in the Army forty-six months, but was never in a combat area.

U3: Do you regret being in the war?

R: No, it was a great experience. I think that-- I hadn't done a lot of traveling before I went into the service and the Army did me a great service. It took me to many places, I traveled all over. And it-- [audio cuts] --a-- it gave me a chance to see places that I'd never seen before and have experiences I had never had before. But, the sting of the segregation hadn't-- never did quite-- never did quite rub off on me-- never did quite

leave me. And I still have some bad thoughts about how I was treated because I don't think it was fair to wave the flag at me and tell me that I'm bringing you into the Army to go out and make the world safe for democracy, and kept me into the Army, and then treat me like I'm a second-class citizen and not do what you promised to do: to treat me fair. So, that was it- the good and the bad about the Army. I have mixed emotions about it.

U1: Did you see any of the Jewish concentration camps? Any Jewish concentration camps, did you ever see--?

R: Yes, I went to Jewish concentration camp, I visited them after the war not during the war. I was in Germany and I wanted to see the-- see a concentration camp, I'd heard so much about it, and I did (visited there?).

U1: While you were in the war, did you know that was happening or, like, did you have anything, like, oh, I knew that was going on or anything? Did you have any idea?

R: Not really. I had no idea that was-- it was that serious. We heard some terrible things but I had no idea they were exterminating people that way: burning people in incinerators like that. I thought they must be wrong about that, but turned out they were not.

U2: Alright Mr. Garth, what was your reaction when you found out, Mr. Reeves?

R: When I found out what?

U2: About the concentration camps and where were you?

R: Oh. I was-- well, horrified to see what really happened. When you saw-- when you saw the result like the ashes and the bones that were left and-- that's-- it was very difficult to comprehend people treating people like that, other people like that. It was a horrible experience and I guess you really had to go and see those things in order to

believe them because today a lot of people don't believe those things happened, and they did, the evidence is there. But that's history and you can't change that.

U1: Do you hold a grudge on, like, anything, like, all the discrimination that was said to you?

R: Hold a grudge?

U1: Yeah, like, to those people who put you down while you were in the war?

R: No, no. No, they-- I remember a lieutenant from Texas talking to me about it. He was a graduate of Texas A&M University and I was Florida A&M University. We used to talk and he thought-- he thought he was-- it was right to separate the races. He felt that way, he said, "Yeah, I think so." But, I said, "Well, what do you prove by that?" And he said, well-- he just felt that white people were more prepared to deal with situations than blacks. He was trying to explain to me why no black officers were in our regimen and I said, "Well how can you tell? You don't have any here." And-- but, he was a true segregationist but he-- it was nothing-- see, with him, like, it was nothing personal. He just believed that he was right. He said he thought it was right that we were treated that way.

U2: Mr. Garth Reeves, this is our last question for you. What advise can you give to our younger generation?

R: Take advantage of all opportunities that are presented to you and when you get knocked down, get up again because nobody's gonna have an easy shot. Nobody gets-- there's no free lunch today. I think a lot of people are looking for a free lunch and there's no free lunch. You gotta pay for everything you get. You will not get everything that's



due you-- how did that expression go? (?) get everything that's-- that you have to work for. And if you--

U1: 'Nothing is free', something like that. 'Nothing is free in this world', something like that. (?) about something that nothing is free in this world, everything you have to pay for it. I don't remember right now but I know--

U2: Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Reeves and-- and--

[audience claps]

Unknown5: Mr. Reeves, we have one more-- [audio cuts] --and, um, asked to move to the back of the train? Can you give us some of the details of what happened on the, um--

U4: When you were coming back to Miami.

R: Oh, yes.

U5: When you was dressed in uniform.

R: Oh, yes. Well, I was shipping-- I was shipping once from Texas, I think, to Seattle, Washington in order to go to the Pacific when we were heading to Hawaii and I had this ticket that called for a Pullman and a dinner car and all that, which all the soldiers got. And I got on the plane and, I think it was Louisiana somewhere and I got-- I asked the porter to show me to my seat- my Pullman. I said, "I'm ready to go to bed" this night, and so he said, "You just have a seat over there. I'll take care of you later." And I waited. An hour later, he came back through and I said, "Well, I'm ready to go to bed, I'm waiting on my seat." And he said, "Just sit down there, I'll--" He kept putting me off and I demanded-- I said, "Look, now, I'm tired and I'm on my way overseas," I said, "I need to get my Pullman, sir." And he told me in-- on certain terms, "Sit down here. I got (the MPs?) on this train, we're gonna lock you up." I said, "No, you gotta be kidding me."

And he said no, he wasn't kidding. And I rode coach all the way from Louisiana across the country to the west coast in a-- in coach. I never did get my seat, never did get my Pullman. Yeah, and so, I asked him for my ticket back, I said, "Well, can I have my ticket back at least so I can turn it in?" And he said, "No", he didn't give me my ticket back. You know, (these things?) people treating you like that, you can't forget things like that. And they were happening to us all the time- everybody (did that?). The government would sell you a ticket and charge you Pullman prices and everything to go across the country and then make you sit up in a coach. And then-- but they don't refund the money or anything. It's just, I guess, scam down in New Orleans with-- in-- after Katrina. Look how they treated the people down there. Look at our local company here, Carnival Cruise Lines. Look at the rip-off- 236 million dollar rip-off that they did on the government. It's in the papers, read about it. They charging all this money, and they charged us like they were getting first class treatment for everybody and a lot of the ships were empty. It's-- everybody seemingly wants to rip-off the government for some reason.

U1: Well, thank you for your time, we really appreciate it.

[audience claps]

R: Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**