

Interviewee: WILLIAM EMORY McDONALD

Interviewer: Michael Smith

Interview Date: May 1, 2000

Location: McDonalds's home, Durham, NC.

Topic: An oral history of William Emory McDonald. Born in Detroit, Michigan, McDonald served in the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, and then graduated from the University of Michigan in 1950 with an engineering degree. McDonald subsequently worked as the director of the physical plant at North Carolina Central University, from which he retired in 1991.

WILLIAM McDONALD

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MICHAEL SMITH: What is your full name, and where and when were you born?

WILLIAM McDONALD: My full name is William Emory McDonald, and I was born in Detroit, Michigan.

MS: And what was your childhood like there?

WM: It was good. I enjoyed my life growing up. I had one brother, and we had a pretty close neighborhood, and knew everyone in the neighborhood. They were like mothers and fathers to me. And they corrected me, [laughs] many times. But, in general it was pleasant, and I enjoyed school, had a pleasant school experience. That's about it.

MS: Did you ever work any part-time jobs when you were growing up in Detroit?

WM: Yes, I sold papers, I don't know, I think about twelve years old. I sold, I was a carrier for the *Detroit Free Press*. I think in my senior year in high school I got a job at

this grocery store, working, let's see, I think I worked Friday nights and Saturdays. Yeah, Friday nights and Saturdays. And so that gave me a little extra spending change, above and beyond my allowance, to buy several things that I wanted.

MS: What types of things did you do for fun, if you ever had free time?

WM: Well, I built model airplanes, I liked airplanes, aviation. I also was interested in electronics, and I built kits and little radios, and things like that. Those were my two, and photography, so those were I guess my three main interests at that time.

MS: What did you plan to do when you graduated from high school?

WM: Go to college, which I eventually did. Well not eventually, but the year I graduated from high school, 1942. And I enrolled at the University of Michigan in 1942 also, that fall.

MS: And how long were you enrolled there?

WM: Well, I had two stints there. I was there until February of 44, when I went into the service, that's when I went into the service. Volunteered and went into the army air force at that time.

MS: What had your first couple years at Michigan been like?

WM: They were tough. The competition was keen. I had to work harder than I ever worked in high school. But I managed it. So it was a new experience for me.

MS: What were some classes that you took?

WM: English, math, Spanish, drafting. We really didn't have engineering courses, per se, until the junior year. Most of them were basic old physics. Physics, chemistry, math, English, let's see, Spanish, foreign language requirement. So basically your freshman and sophomore year, those were the courses you took.

MS: Why did you decide to enter the service?

WM: I had a, there was an upperclassman, he was there at Michigan the same time I was. He was interested in aviation. He jointed the air force, and before he left we talked a lot about it. He, I'll say he persuaded me, in a sense, or influenced me into making the decision to join the air corps.

MS: Why did you pick the air corps over one of the other branches?

WM: Well, I guess that's where my interests lied. Really when I went in I didn't, my ambition was not to fly, I wanted to be a navigator for some reason, I don't know why. I wanted to be a navigator. Oh, and I knew the navy was out, because when I first went to Michigan I attempted to enroll in the ROT--well, I didn't really want to enroll, but the upperclassmen they'd tell you to go over there and try and enroll. Well at that time, they were rejecting all the black students, so we'd just do that just to aggravate them I guess. See what kind of excuses they would come up with that time. So the navy was out, and the marine corps was out. The only other avenue was the U.S. Air Force, and they were starting this new experiment as they called it, and so I thought that would be something I might be interested in.

MS: How did you go about signing up and enlisting?

WM: Oh, I enlisted, I don't know, I guess someone contacted me, I just don't remember. It's been what, fifty-some years ago? I'm sure we didn't e-mail them, didn't have a website. So they probably had some recruiting thing, or you wrote to someone or something.

MS: Where did you go for basic training?

WM: To Keysler Field, that's in Biloxi, Mississippi.

MS: What were your impressions of Mississippi? Had you ever been there before?

WM: No, I'd never been there before in my life, and it was kind of terrible. We were segregated, I mean in a sense that was demeaning. All of the black cadets and precadets, we were put over in a fenced-in area by ourselves and then there was a, if you can see this, a walkway to the main base with twelve-foot fences, so you had to march through this thing to get any services that you needed, medical or dental or go to the PX or anything like that, you had to march through this fenced-in area and get it and then you'd come back to the barracks. So it was somewhat demeaning. Wasn't a good experience.

MS: What type of training did you receive there?

WM: Normal marching, and how to shoot the rifle. It was somewhat, of course at that time it was still the, I don't know if they do it today or not, but it was still the army. So, we received basically army training, basic training. But, just general physical fitness and calisthenics and how to shoot a gun, and that sort of thing.

MS: Where did you go after you left basic training?

WM: Went to Tuskegee--Tuskegee, Alabama.

MS: And what kind of training did you have there?

WM: It was more basic. [laughs] I guess we stayed there, oh I don't know, six months, you know the classes were backing up, and they didn't know I guess what to do with us. And so they would, we would just go from one training phase the other. But it was just basically the same thing, to keep you busy. Until finally I went into the cadet corps. And then of course the first phase of that is that you go to primary which is on the campus of Tuskegee. The primary training was, what would you call it, contracted. It was operated

by civilians, the instructors were all civilians. And that's where you basically learned to fly. And we stayed in one of the dormitories at, it was Tuskegee Institute then.

MS: Do you remember the first time that you flew?

WM: Oh yes, yes. And that was the first time that I had been in an airplane. It was a marvelous experience.

MS: What types of aircraft did you use?

WM: There was a PT17, that was the primary one.

MS: Did you have a favorite aircraft that you flew or used?

WM: Well, I guess the AT6, which we used in basic and advanced. And I washed out in advanced, so that was the only two planes that I flew.

MS: Why did you like the AT6 better?

WM: Well, it was powerful. You could do aerobatics in it. It was just a nice plane.

MS: What did you think of your officers and non-commissioned officers?

WM: Some were good, some weren't so good.

MS: Are there any particular officers that you remember as being particularly good or bad?

WM: Yeah, I guess Gabe Hawkins, everybody remembers him. Well he wasn't an instructor, he was in charge I guess of all the cadets, the flying, he was the head person. On that part of the operations at the base. Of course Colonel Parrish was the, oh what do you call him, chief officer in charge. Can't think of what that is. But he was real nice.

MS: What were your living conditions like?

WM: Just like most GIs, I guess, we stayed in those barracks, two-story barracks, and the only difference there, instead of being open we had rooms, normally two to three cadets per room. But they weren't real fancy at all.

MS: How did you get along with your roommates?

WM: Oh, fine.

MS: What did you do when you weren't on duty. Did you have much free time?

WM: We didn't have a lot of free time, no. We had rec hall, I guess, we'd go over there. We weren't allowed to, but sometimes we would put on fatigues and sneak down to the, we used to call it the hootie pool, that's because of the beer they sold, the hootie pool, beer. And we'd go down there sometimes and drink beer. That was about it. Wasn't much of a social life.

MS: How did you and the other servicemen interact with the local civilians? Did you ever run into them?

WM: Well, we didn't run into them very often. We were pretty well isolated, unless you went into town and I went in I think once or twice and I just didn't like it, so I'd rather stay on the base.

MS: Did you army provide any kinds of entertainment, like movies?

WM: Oh yeah, they had movies, yeah, that's right in the movie theater. I think three times a week they changed.

MS: Do you remember any of the movies especially?

WM: Not really.

MS: What were conditions like in the airplane when you were in the air? What was the temperature like, or was it noisy?

WM: Well it was pretty chilly in the wintertime. Summertime it wasn't too bad, it was warm but we still had our flight jackets because of the wind, because well the PTs of course they were open cockpit. The ATs was closed canopy. But in the summer you've got the air coming through there and it wasn't bad at all. Winter was about the, but you were warm, we had, you know our flight outfits, and we had gloves and it wasn't bad. I don't recall any discomfort that I can remember.

MS: Were there many accidents during training?

WM: Not many. I can remember one ground accident, one of the cadets was taxiing and he ran into another plane. Oh yes, we did, and that was in primary. One of the cadets got killed. That was the only one in the time that I was in training. One plane collided with the other, he cut off his tail, he was able to land, but the plane that was, well his rudder and elevators were demolished. And of course he had not control, and he crashed. But that was the only one in my class. But the other classes when I was there, they didn't. I don't know what the accident ratio or the death ratio was. It was pretty low though. I don't know how that compared with other bases but ours was pretty low.

MS: After you joined the service, were there any ways that you felt the service was discriminating against you or the other people in your unit?

WM: Oh, yes. [laughs] Just the fact that we were at Tuskegee, isolated in the hills of Alabama. You were constantly reminded that this was an experiment, that there was some doubts, a lot of doubt, that you couldn't do it. Yeah, everyday we were reminded of it.

MS: What did you do when you finished your training at Tuskegee?

WM: Well, as I told you I washed out in advanced. I worked in the tower for a short time, maybe about six months I guess, I worked in the control tower. And then I was shipped out to Florida, to Drew Field, Florida, that's right outside of Tampa. And when I went there I got into special services, and I played in the band. I was there, and I stayed there until they discharged me. So, my musical background helped me. [laughs] That was a nice experience, because we had a lot of freedom. And that was about it.

MS: What was the food like in the service?

WM: I guess one objection I had to it, and I found out later that some officer had decided that to keep black troops happy you had to give them pork. So we'd have it, and you know it's hot in Alabama, and it seemed like every day they'd have this big greasy pork, some kind or another, laying up there, you know. That was, I think I still have that book, I found the book that was actually written, it was an army directive on how to treat Negro soldiers. And in there, that was the diet, you know, eat plenty of pork, and greens, and something else, and most of us, that diet was contrary to what we'd been accustomed to. So that was--but they gave you plenty of food, there was plenty of it. You had some choices, you could you know just leave stuff off, and still you could find enough to eat. So we managed to make it. And of course you know in those days we were probably, I don't know, burning three thousand calories a day. We'd eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and whatever other snacks we were able to pick up. But it wasn't a real problem.

MS: What were your uniforms like? Did you like or dislike your uniforms?

WM: No, never even thought about it, you know. That's what everyone wore. That was standard fare.

MS: Did you wear a different uniform when you went to Florida and were serving there?

WM: No, basically the same uniform. The only difference was the insignias and pins and stuff you had on.

MS: Was there much problem with people being AWOL at all?

WM: No, I don't know of anyone being AWOL, no one that I ever knew went AWOL.

MS: Were there any other discipline infractions that you witnessed, that people were punished for?

WM: No, not really. Of course in the corps you had some special things that were probably different from the regular army, depending on who was in charge. I remember in primary the officer in charge, he didn't like chewing gum and he didn't like smoking, so they would set up rules you know like restricting where you could smoke and if you were caught chewing gum say at reveille or at any time in the formal formation, then you might be disciplined for that. Most of those were walking discipline, or, well there were some other infractions, if your room wasn't up to par, everything done, your bed made just right and everything you might get some demerits for that. Most of those we walked off. That was the discipline for it. Which wasn't an easy discipline, walking in the hot sun in Alabama for an hour or two at a pretty rapid pace could get a little tiring.

MS: Is there anything you remember from your time in the service that was especially funny or sad, that has stuck with you?

WM: No, not really.

MS: Did you ever see any famous people when you were in the service?

WM: No, not personally. No, wait a minute, I saw, let me retract that. When I was in special services in Florida, the USO would come with shows. And I met people like Louis Armstrong, and what's the fellow, Jordan, that's his last name, Jordan, Billie

Holiday came there one time. And then some lesser-known folks, but part of being in special services, you had to be a gopher for people, for the celebrities when they would come in. Of course they didn't pay any attention to us, they just looked at us, like any other gopher.

MS: What types of things did you have to do for them?

WM: Well, whatever they wanted. If they wanted a soda, or if they wanted some coffee, or run an errand, or go get something for them that they had to use onstage or something, that sort of, you know, just whatever needed to be done.

MS: At the time and looking back on it, are you proud of your time in the military?

Would you do it again?

WM: Well, you mean would I volunteer? Well, you can't compare then to now. I don't know. All things being equal, if it was like it was then, no I wouldn't do it.

MS: Do you remember where you were or how you felt when you found out that the war was over?

WM: Yes, I felt good because I thought that I would be getting out of the service. I could go back to school and take up life where I'd left off before I went in.

MS: When was it, and how did you get out of the service?

WM: They had a point system, and I guess the point system, well, the first element was the length of time that we were in service, then it would depend on what kind of outfit you were in, whether they had surplus or not, so when you put all these things together you get a certain point. Then they say, well, we're going to just, let's say discharge people at this point in time with 45 points. So if you had the 45 points then you would be eligible for discharge. If you had 30 that meant you just had to wait around doing nothing until it

got down to 30, so that was kind of boring, just sitting around waiting to get out. You knew you were getting out, and you weren't doing anything, and it was just a waste of time. But I'm sure they had to, you know, when I got discharged there was just, we had what, thirteen million folks in the service, and I was discharged in Chicago, what's the name of that base up there in Chicago, and it took us about three days just to go on through the system. Of course you had to get you know physicals and get all your data together and everything, fill out all the forms. So, and it was packed, the place was packed, and we had bunks three high that we stayed in, and it was just in and out, I mean trains were coming in every day, packed, and leaving out.

MS: Have you seen any movies or TV shows that have dealt with the Tuskegee Airmen?

WM: Yes, the one, the HBO film. That's the only one that I know of.

MS: Did you think that it did a good job of showing how it really was?

WM: Not really, no. As a matter of fact I went to the premiere of it in Atlanta and the producers you know, they explained to us that they have to have something to sell, they're in the business of making money. So they took certain licenses with the film. But there were a lot of errors in it. But I think to tell the whole story, you know, you'd have to have a miniseries or something. You couldn't possibly do it in an hour or an hour and twenty minutes, it's just impossible to do.

MS: Do you remember any of the mistakes that you especially noticed?

EM: Well, like they had one of the cadets flying Mrs. Roosevelt, and that wasn't the case. She flew a long time, she went to Alabama, to Mouton Field, that's a private field, a civilian field, where we first learned to fly. And the impression was left that white army officers taught us to fly. And it wasn't, it was blacks that taught us to fly. What else, oh,

the suicide. That was the funniest thing, I've never heard anybody committing suicide. That was ridiculous. And I think the, we didn't come into Tuskegee airbase, you came into a little place called Chetaw, I guess was the name of that little place, they just kind of skimmed over that, a little place in Alabama. So those were some of the major things that I think about. I haven't seen the picture in a long time now. But, some of it was true. You know, I think they did a fair job. The Tuskegee Airmen, they had been negotiating with filmmakers and everything about a film, but never could come to any decision. HBO took it and made something, and I don't know how that's going to work out, because at the time nothing was copyrighted, and so all the information was free to be used any kind of way, but now that loophole has been covered, so I don't know how that'll work out. That's about all right now that I can think of.

MS: What did you do after you were discharged?

WM: I came back, I was discharged in May, May 12 of 45, it would be 45 I guess, 45 or 46. But at any rate, I got a job, I worked until August, then went back to school in August. At Michigan they had a special program, it was about a two-week program, for veterans, and I guess they were trying to reorient you I guess to civilian life on campus. And some of it was real positive like they had a course in speed-reading that they gave us, and some other things, so it was worthwhile. But at any rate, two weeks prior to the semester, you went through this special session they had, but then reenrolled and that was that, I graduated 1950.

MS: What did you do after you graduated?

WM: My first job, well when I graduated of course we were right in the middle of that, I call it the Eisenhower depression. I graduated in February I guess, January or February, I

couldn't get a job. In those days, they just didn't hire black engineers. Well, I knew that and I was prepared for that, I said, well, if I can't get a job in this country, I'll go to Canada or Mexico, or South America, or Europe, and find a job. But I looked, so at any rate I had to have some money, so I went to work on the production line at Ford Motor Company. Finally in July the city had advertised for engineers, the city of Detroit, public lighting commission. So, and I applied for it, and I said, well, I'll see what happens here. At any rate, it came through. So I started work there July 5, that would be what, July 5, 1950. And I worked there for two, three years, I guess. And then a friend of mine, she was in personnel at the Detroit Arsenal, and she talked to me and got me interested in a job they had out there, it was basically doing research, which I wanted to do. And so I negotiated with them, and I went to work with them. I worked there about three years, till 1955, 56, something like that. And I wasn't getting anywhere. Two job openings came up and they managed to sidestep me there, so I quit. And I went to a small electronics firm. The president of it was the dean of electrical engineering at the University of Detroit. Well, about that time we went into another depression, and the major stockholder in the firm, had a number of firms throughout the United States, so he just arbitrarily said any of the firms that didn't make ten percent, he'd look into combining them with another firm. Well, that's what he did. We made money, we weren't losing money, so he combined it with one of his firms in St. Louis. And I didn't want to move to St. Louis, so I left there, well we closed the business down and shifted to St. Louis. Some went and some like myself stayed in Detroit. Well then I took a job with Chrysler Missile. And I stayed there for about a year, and I got an offer from North American Aviation, in Columbus, Ohio, which was kind of fit it all in my dreams, because I loved aviation and incidentally they

made the P51 and made the AT6, and I said, this is nice. And the company was good, the company was good. I enjoyed working for them, and it was just marvelous. And then Rockwell came and merged with us, well they didn't merge, they took it over, that's what happened, they took it over. So I got disenchanted with Rockwell, so I started looking around, and almost by accident I was notified, or introduced to this job in Durham, North Carolina, at North Carolina Central University. So I came down and interviewed, and the consent decree had just been signed, and there was a big expansion going on. And I said well, I was 50 at that time, I said well, I work another 15 years, and then I can see the fruition of my work, see. So I came, and been here ever since. I retired in 91, that was a few years after I hit 65, I was about 67 at the time. And I've been here ever since.

MS: When you moved to Durham, did it seem different from other places that you'd lived?

WM: Yes, there were some differences. But you know, it wasn't anything that I didn't like. It was, people were nice, and I guess, you know, by being with the University I was in kind of a closed type society, and as far as access to facilities, it was the same as any other city.

MS: What position did you hold at Central?

WM: I was the physical plant director.

MS: How did you like it? What were your interactions like with other staff or faculty?

WM: Nice, they were all good relationships. There were a few that you had problems-- physical plant work is not always a bed of roses. Anytime something goes wrong, you're the man, so, but, no, generally I would say my relationships with the faculty folks was generally good. I tried to please them, help them get the facilities, because a lot of my

work was capitalization and writing proposals for capital improvements and that sort of thing, so we worked pretty closely together.

MS: How has Durham changed since you've moved here?

WM: Tremendously in size. It was just a nice, quiet place. The growth is just phenomenal. But the same thing happened in Columbus, Ohio, when we worked there, it was basically a college town, Ohio State is there. It grew, and so we moved here, the same pattern followed. I think that, I find this, I guess just a personal feeling, that a lot of people who come in here aren't as courteous as it used to be, people were very courteous to one another. Especially when driving, I see that. Some of that has diminished, a different spirit, I think.

MS: Why did you decide to stay in Durham when you retired? Did you ever consider moving away again?

WM: No, no. Well one thing, I got spoiled, the weather's nice here. I don't mind not having snow, especially twenty-some inches like we had this last winter. But you know, the winters were relatively mild, and the weather was nice, it's a little bit warmer than say Columbus or Detroit in the summertime, but as far as peak temperatures you had the same thing there, but just shorter duration and maybe once or twice during the summer. So, and then another thing, I made a lot of friends here, I belong to organizations here, I work with a rehab unit, and church, I got involved in my church, and so I like the church, and I like all the people in the church, my fraternity here, I'm active in it, so there's just no reason to leave. I'm happy and satisfied.

MS: How many children do you have?

WM: I have three children, two girls and a son. Well I had three children. Two girls and a son. My son passed last April, April of 99. I have one daughter who stays in Goldsboro, she just retired last year from the U.S. Air Force, she has a home there so she's right now, she's planning on staying there. My other daughter stays here, she's divorced, has a son, he's a sophomore at State, and she's working on her doctorate in education. She's a PA by training but her ultimate goal is to teach and that's why she's going to be a Ph.D. in education, and as I say she has one son. The other daughter has one son, and two grandchildren. So I'm a great-grandfather, with two.

MS: Do you think the fact that your daughter joined the air force was influenced by the fact that you'd been a flyer?

WM: It might have been, I don't know, I really don't know. She wanted to go into the service, and so she felt that was the best place to be, in the air force.

MS: Do you feel that because of the times being different, that her experience in the military was different than yours?

WM: Oh it was much different, much different. It's a different world altogether. It's just kind of hard to imagine, you know. When she was there I'd get down to Seymour Johnson, go around the base, and it's just different, it's just hard to imagine what we have now.

MS: Do you feel that the things you and the other Tuskegee Airmen went through kind of helped pave the way for people like your daughter to have different experiences?

WM: I hope so, I like to think that. But, you know, I think men like Noel Parrish and President Truman and Walter White of the NAACP, all of these people were very influential in bringing about these changes too. I think without a lot of advocacy, it never

would have come about. But I like to think, yeah, that the Tuskegee experiment had something to do with it. Maybe a lot to do with it, but it took a lot of other people and other efforts too, to make the air force what it is today. I don't think anyone can match it, that is the other forces, not in the least. I'm proud of the air force.