

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Rusty Burns

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Burns, Rusty, 1925-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rusty Burns,
Dates:	October 7, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:29:12).
Abstract:	Flight instructor and tuskegee airman Rusty Burns (1925 -) received his aviation training at Tuskegee Institute where he graduated in 1944 as a single engine pilot, making him one of the youngest Tuskegee Airmen. He later returned to Los Angeles, and opened Rusty's Flying Service, giving flight instruction at Compton Airport until 1971, after which he became an aviation consultant. Burns was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 7, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_238
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Tuskegee Airman and flight instructor Rusty Burns was born Isham Albert Burns, Jr. on July 24, 1925 in Charity Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana. Burns developed his love for aviation in the fifth grade at Corpus Christi Catholic School. In 1939, he moved to Los Angeles, California with his family where he studied aeronautics at Jordon High School. At age sixteen, he worked at Burbank Airport while learning about aircraft, theory of flight, navigation and meteorology. In 1942, Burns passed the federal aviation exam. After receiving his diploma in 1943, he was inducted into the United States Army at Fort MacArthur and was sent to Kessler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi. After completing basic training, he became a certified pre-aviation cadet.

Burns received his aviation training at Tuskegee Institute and Air Base where he graduated in 1944 as a single engine pilot making him one of the youngest of the Tuskegee Airmen. During his time at the Tuskegee Institute, he received twelve hours of college classes a day in addition to his training as a soldier. Burns trained on several aircrafts including the BT-13 and the AT-6. He successfully completed his training in September of 1944 and became a member of the 99th Fighter Squadron at Godman's Field in Kentucky. Burns' military career ended in June of 1945 as World War II ended. He returned to Los Angeles and joined the United States Postal Service where he worked for nine years.

Burns returned to aviation after buying and rebuilding his own airplane. In 1955, he opened Rusty's Flying Service and began giving flight instruction, at Compton Airport. He became one of the only Tuskegee Airmen in Los Angeles to return to an aviation career. He trained over five hundred students before selling his business in 1971 to become an aviation consultant. He consulted for several companies in the private sector including Teledyne, Rocketdyne, Rockwell and North American Airlines. He retired in 1988 after developing a travel service program for the United States' government.

Burns lives with his wife in California and has four children including author, Khephra Burns.

Burns was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 7, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Rusty Burns was conducted by Shawn Wilson on October 7, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Flight instructor and tuskegee airman Rusty Burns (1925 -) received his aviation training at Tuskegee Institute where he graduated in 1944 as a single engine pilot, making him one of the youngest Tuskegee Airmen. He later returned to Los Angeles, and opened Rusty's Flying Service, giving flight instruction at Compton Airport until 1971, after which he became an aviation consultant.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Burns, Rusty, 1925-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Neculai Burghelea (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Burns, Rusty, 1925- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd.

Occupations:

Tuskegee Airman

HistoryMakers® Category:

MilitaryMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rusty Burns, October 7, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Rusty Burns, Section A2005_238_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Rusty Burns was born on July 24, 1925 in New Orleans, Louisiana to Nona Bertrand Burns and Isham Burns, Sr. His maternal ancestor, Francois Bertrand, was a free African from Dominica who immigrated to Biloxi, Mississippi in 1854. Burns' maternal grandparents, Rosie Bertrand and Joe Bertrand, Sr., were of mixed heritage. His paternal grandfather, James Burns, the first African American principal in Mississippi, practiced law in Jackson, Mississippi. Burns' parents met in Biloxi and moved to New Orleans, Louisiana after they married. Burns' father was a postman and his mother was a waitress. They separated when he was five years old. Burns attended Corpus Christi Catholic School and Valena C. Jones Elementary School. On Saturdays, he used the money he made shining shoes and selling scrap metal to watch vaudeville shows. Once, he snuck into the segregated Saenger Theatre and witnessed the racism of the white patrons. Burns also remembers being burnt from stepping in hot starch and his fear of the local butcher.

Video Oral History Interview with Rusty Burns, Section A2005_238_001_002, TRT: 0:30:14 ?

Rusty Burns was a shy child who spent most of his time working or at school while growing up. He began building model airplanes at the age of eleven. In 1933, his mother moved to Los Angeles, California. Burns stayed with an aunt before joining his mother in 1939. Burns then attended William McKinley Junior High School in Los Angeles. His mother worked as a domestic in Hollywood, and his aunt was a housekeeper for Clark Gable. Burns watched the airplanes as he shined shoes at Lockheed Air Terminal in Burbank, California. His family relocated to the middle class neighborhood of Central Avenue Gardens, and he attended David Starr Jordan High School. In his senior year, the U.S. Army opened its doors to black pilots, and Burns took a class on aviation. He remembers struggling to gain weight to pass the Army's physical exam. After graduating in 1943, Burns enlisted and went to Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi for basic training. In 1944, he was sent to the Tuskegee Institute and Tuskegee Airfield.

Video Oral History Interview with Rusty Burns, Section A2005_238_001_003, TRT: 0:30:13 ?

Rusty Burns attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama while completing a pre-aviation training program. He graduated in 1944 as one of the youngest Tuskegee Airmen at the age of nineteen. Burns admired pilot Wendell O. Pruitt, and had the opportunity to fly with him at Tuskegee. Burns describes the history of African Americans in the U.S. Air Force, the Freeman Field Mutiny in 1945, and the racism he encountered as an African American officer. He was sent to Walterboro, South Carolina to prepare to go overseas to Europe, but with World War II winding down, he was reassigned to the Pacific Theater. The war ended before Burns was ever deployed, and he was discharged from Godman Army Airfield in Fort Knox, Kentucky in 1946. He returned to California, where he worked at the post office. In 1950, he married Treneta Burns and took an additional job at North American Airlines to support his growing family. In 1955, he bought two airplanes and kept them at Compton/Woodley Airport in Compton, California.

Video Oral History Interview with Rusty Burns, Section A2005_238_001_004, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

Rusty Burns attended Pepperdine University in Malibu on the G.I. Bill, but did not finish his degree. While there, he met his wife, and they married in 1950. Burns ran a flight school with Paul Anderson for a year before founding Rusty's Flying Service in 1955. He operated out of Compton/Woodley Airport and taught a range of students, both white and black. He sold the business in 1971 and took a job with Teledyne Technologies. In 1972, he returned to North American Airlines to work as a buyer. Two years later, Burns accepted a

position as a senior buyer with Aerojet Rocketdyne, where he was mentored by Bob Odom and developed a program for government travelers to take the most direct and inexpensive route when flying. In reflecting on the progress of black pilots, Burns argues that the Tuskegee Airmen should have been more active in encouraging black youth to pursue aviation. He notes that black pilots comprise only one percent of all aviation professionals. Burns also describes his children and close friends.

Video Oral History Interview with Rusty Burns, Section A2005_238_001_005, TRT: 0:29:46 ?

Rusty Burns remembers guarding his flight school, Rusty's Flying Service, with a gun during the Watts Riots in 1965. The Tuskegee Airmen were featured on a national television program between 1978 and 1991. Both George Lucas and HBO hoped to produce a movie about the Tuskegee Airmen, and the latter premiered 'The Tuskegee Airmen' in 1995. Burns argues that he and former Tuskegee Airmen should have used the show's fame to encourage young African Americans to become pilots. He claims that a lack of exposure keeps African American youth from pursuing aviation. In 1991, Burns served as president of the Los Angeles, California chapter of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. Burns reflects upon the importance of history, his legacy and his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He remembers his mother pinning on his wings as his proudest moment. Burns talks about hip hop and youth culture, and his son, Kephra Burns' play, 'Tall Horse.' Burns concludes the interview by describing his plans for the future.