

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Edward Brantley Remembers



"So, if this country would stop this silly game of holding a person down because of the color of their skin, we would have been to the moon a long time ago."

[Born in Los Angeles, Edward Brantley is a former airman and flight crew chief in the U.S. Air Force and retired Deputy Sheriff. In this narrative, he describes the effects of racism on his quest to become an airman and how his self-respect and passion for flying allowed him to overcome these obstacles.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- In what ways did Edward Brantley learn to respect himself? As you read through this narrative, think about how this self-respect influenced his actions throughout his life.
- Why did the doctor at the military hospital in Lincoln, Nebraska, tell Mr. Brantley that the Air Force didn't need or want him?
- Why did the Commanding Officer at Hondo, Texas, say he didn't like Edward Brantley? Thinking about the concept of self-respect, do you think that Brantley's self-esteem affected the Commanding Officer's view of him? Why or why not? Consider, too, how African Americans in the Jim Crow South were taught to interact with whites.
- Why was Brantley sentenced to nine months hard labor?
- In what ways did racism rear its ugly head on job applications at the commercial airline companies? How do you think you would react if you were asked similar questions?
- What does Brantley mean when he says, "If this country would stop this silly game of holding a person down because of the color of their skin, we would have been to the moon a long time ago?"

Growing up with lessons in self-respect.

I was born [in Los Angeles] on ... 1818 East 54th street, a cul-du-sac street in a community called the Furlong Home Drive. That little area turned out two policemen, one structural cement engineer, a dentist ... Mayor Tom Bradley ... lived on 52nd street, just about a block separating [our] two [streets].

... [Self-respect] was drilled into me from the time I woke up until the time I went to bed. "You are a Brantley. And don't you forget it. You will carry yourself as a Brantley, don't you say or think anything that's going to bring any kind of ridicule or ... any kind of bad thoughts about this family." [I heard this] every day and especially on Saturdays. "Here is your dime, put it in your pocket and you will walk with your head up high, your shoulders back and you will cross the street and you will stay on that side of the street until you get to the corner ... you will speak to Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so and you will speak to Mr. and Mrs. So-and so and then you will walk all the way to the corner where you will turn and go to the theater. And, don't look at those rowdy, drunken people on the corners." There wasn't a Saturday that went by that I didn't get that lecture. Kids don't get that today.

The chance to fly

When I heard about the chance to fly, it was at the induction center in San Pedro. One of the cadre came in and asked if anybody was interested in [joining] the Air Force. Well, my hand went up right away. About 60 of us, I guess, were pulled out to take the exam. Only two of us emerged after the exam. This young boy, who was white, he was sent to Santa Ana. And, I couldn't pronounce where I was being sent.... It was Tuskegee. So, we put our heads together and said, well, since we were the only two to emerge from the examination, maybe we could stick together and fly together and shoot down the Germans together. So, I went back into the office and asked whether I could be sent to Santa Ana to train. And, they told me to get out of the office; they would send me where they wanted me to go.

Well ... I got a notice that Tuskegee was full. There were no billets available for me, so I was being sent to Lincoln, Nebraska. Now, I want you to keep in mind that this is in February. It was an 80- or 90-degree day here. When I got off of the train in Omaha, it was maybe ten degrees above [zero]. I had never seen weather like that. That night it snowed. The snow was so deep that it went all the way over the roof. They had to dig us out. At the induction center, the shoes that they gave me were too big, because I wore a 13 triple A. They didn't have any such thing, so they told me to use my own shoes, because the ones that they gave me (I don't think Shaquille O'Neil's feet would stay in those shoes) were that wide. Marching in that Nebraska snow, one minute my foot is in my shoe, the other it's stepping out into the snow. My feet got wet, and, shortly after that, I developed pneumonia.

I was sent to the hospital, and, after I recuperated, I was called for by the flight surgeon. He very graciously says, "You're that niggra that's supposed to go to Tuskegee?" I said, "Yes, sir." "Well, you can just forget those airplanes. They don't need you; they don't want you. And, I can't understand why they're trying to train you nigras anyway." I said, "Well, can I be a bombardier? Navigator? Gunner? Radio operator ... ?" I called off all the positions I could think of. He said, "Don't you understand English?" I said, "Yes, Sir." "They don't want you and don't need you. Now, get on out of here...." This was a major and a doctor talking. I was then sent to Hondo, Texas.

On the day I reported to my Commanding Officer (CO), I came in with a very snappy step, fresh out of ROTC in high school, and I gave him a very snappy salute, clicked my heels. He looked down [and said], "What in the hell is that?" And, I said, "What, sir?" "Clicking your heels in my office." I said, "Well, that's proper military courtesy." "This ain't no German army. Don't you come stomping your heels in my office. And besides, you're AWOL." I said, "No, sir, as a matter of fact, I'm a day early." "Well, you uppity. I can see I'm going to have trouble with you. You think you're better than the rest of these boys I got here?" I said, "No, sir." "Just because you was a cadet don't make you better than the rest of these boys. Now, I'm going to break you, boy. I don't like you, [and] I don't like the way you act and the way you talk.' I thought, God, what is it about me?"

So, he rode me like a young bronco. Every time I would turn around, he was on me about something. Well, he doesn't like me [so] I'm going to give him something not to like me for. So, I started asking for permission to get out of his outfit and go to [one of the] tech schools. And, he would rescind the request. "You sent in another one of them requests to go to school, didn't you, boy? Well, I rescinded it. You ain't going nowhere. You're going to stay right here, and I'm going to break you."

... I started asking for newspapers from home. Couldn't have them. They were considered inflammatory reading. We could only go to the base PX certain hours of the day and only on paydays, well into the afternoon by the time everything is picked over. We couldn't use the swimming pool, naturally. We couldn't use the library. And, we couldn't use the church. I went to church and was asked to leave. I think that was the highlight of ... one of the touchiest events in my life.

But, that didn't end then. I stepped out of formation one morning, and I told him that I was a committee of one to inform him that we were not "sons of bitches," that we all had mothers we

loved, [and] that, if we had a name and he had difficulty pronouncing it, don't try. If we had a rank, then address us by our ranks. If we had no rank, and he didn't pronounce our names right, then he should address us as soldiers. Because that's what's we all were. None of us were boys. So, I saluted him and stepped back into what was a close order drill. There was nobody on my right, nobody on my left. They'd all given me plenty of space, saying that I was crazy. He said, that's ... indicating that this is "one."

So, I gave him some more to count. I had heard that the officers in Freeman Field in Indiana were having difficulties, and so I decided to give him a little of the same medicine. Since I couldn't go to the base theater--there were only two rows of seats. And, the white boys would sit ... checkerboard [in] that section. If there was one seat filled and the other one filled [with the] one in the center empty, I couldn't sit there. And, I couldn't tell them to move out of the section that was relegated for me. So, I complained about that. I complained that I couldn't go in to the PX restaurant and sit down and eat--I had to order from a little slot in the door on the outside. Can't go to church on the base, can't go to the USO shows put on mainly by black entertainers. So, I just bitched.

So, he figured out a way to get to me. He was shipping out to go overseas, and he left me a court martial. Within 20 minutes of my being ushered in to the courtroom, I was tried, fined, and confined ... all within 20 minutes ... sentenced to nine months at hard labor. If I didn't work hard enough during the day, at night, after dinner, I would have to take a pair of household scissors, and get down on my hands and weed under the chain link fence. Now, in Texas, I guess anywhere in the South, that's no place to be, on your hands and knees at night, because that's when the scorpions and centipedes crawl and the baby rattlers [are out]. And, neither one of those let you know they're in the neighborhood. So, I managed to survive that.

After being released from incarceration, I didn't have enough points to get out of Texas. At the same time, my sister needed an operation for her heart. This was going to be one of the first open-heart surgeries in the city. So I figured, well, if I re-enlist, I could take that re-enlistment bonus, my travel pay, and my vacation pay and ... give her a nice little nest-egg to start saving for her operation. So, I re-enlisted. I got out of Texas, and I chose my base, which was Hamilton. While at Hamilton Field, California, I would hang around on the flight line and help the guys do ... inspections on their aircraft. Then, we would go up for a shakedown flight.

After finding out that I was accruing more flight hours than some of the guys ... assigned to the section, the operations officer called me in and asked me what kind of work did I do. I said, "Well, I'm the service records and insurance clerk at base headquarters." He said, "Yes, but you come down here on the flight line and you hang around here after work and you fly nights. Sometimes, you don't get in until eight or nine the next morning. What do you do, do you go to your barracks ... to sleep?" I said, "No sir." "You mean you fly all night long sitting up and then you don't eat breakfast and you run to work?" I said, "Yes, sir." "Now, you do that just about every time you go up. You like flying that much?" I said, "I sure do." He said, "Anybody that loves flying airplanes and working on them as much as you do should have the job. You tell your CO that I'm requesting your transfer as of now."

My CO happened to be the nephew of John Philip Sousa. He recognized that flame in me that [made me] want to fly, because he'd been on some of the flights that I crewed. So, I told him what was happening, and he says, "Of course. Good luck." And, he signed my request for transfer. I had the occasion to fly with him on a number of other craft. There's so much more, but I'm just hitting the highlights....

Visible pride, invisible anger and sadness

When I got out of the service and went to apply for a job at United, I was given a stack of papers this thick.... They wanted to know had I ever seen my mother undressed, how did I feel, was I turned on by it, had she ever touched me in any salacious way, on and on and on. And ... I said, I'm not going to grace these papers with an answer. So, I turned in the application, and the young lady, I could hear [her] but I couldn't see. I could hear [her ripping it up]. I never did hear from United. Continental had me go through a lie-detector test. And, I was asked how I felt about me having a relationship with a white girl. I said, "Well, if she likes me and I like her, I'm going for it." Never did hear from Western ... never did hear from TWA. I couldn't get a job in the battery shop, which is the dirtiest place around an airplane ... or the tire shop. Yes, I've got a lot of bitterness, but I'm too old now.

And I see these young kids now--we have a young lady, her name is Stacy Harris. If you watch KCET, you'll probably see her. She is seen sitting in the cockpit of a 747-400 sometimes, with her arm on the yoke. And, she's explaining how she enjoys flying, going places and coming back. She's the captain. She's a young lady in her 40s. That's her daytime job ... she is squadron commander of a ... C-141. (She was, and now she's a full Colonel and she's assistant head of maintenance at Tinker Air Base. And that's her job). Her rise is so meteoric [that] I can't keep up with her.

This country ... damn the "40 acres and a mule." This country could have utilized brainpower that is untold ... unimaginable. For example, there's a young man who was bitter and about ready to go down the tube. But, something snapped in him and he turned his life around. He is one of the world's ... not [just] this country's ... one of the world's leading brain surgeons. He came out of Compton.

They didn't want us to learn to read and write. We built this country on the backs of slaves. The design of Washington, D.C., was from the pen or pencil of a young black man. Your refrigerator ... a young black man. The elevator ... Otis ... young black man ... The lathes [that] were designed for mass production of shoes...young black man. And, it was in spite of being told they don't want you to read and write.

My grandmother was an ex-slave. She stressed, "Stay in school, son. Learn all that you can." And, she was self-taught. But ... as a housekeeper for two of the most educated and influential women in this country, Dr. Nellie Sullivan and Dr. Grace Fernall at UCLA, she would listen to them talk, and Grandma came home with a whole lot of psychology that she imparted to us. So, if this country would stop this silly game of holding a person down because of the color of their skin, we would have been to the moon a long time ago.

Words of wisdom for today's children

[Here's] what I want to say to these young kids. We have worked hard. We have opened the door of opportunity for them. We want them to prepare themselves, because there are ample opportunities for them to study. People out here [are] just dying to give them a helping hand, but they have to prepare themselves first. You just can't step off the street into an airplane. You have to have some kind of knowledge, and you've got to want to learn. I wish I could turn the clock back. With the opportunities these kids have today? ... They can go to ground school, pre-flight. They can run the whole flying course, and, in most cases, it won't cost them nothing. There's a young man teaching kids in Compton with a flight simulator ... something I never dreamed of. These kids can come in out of grammar school, junior high school, and high school and sit down there, and, in a few months, they're almost ready for soloing. And, they're not taking advantage of it. And, that hurts. When I consider what we've gone through ... it hurts that the kids are not taking advantage of it.