

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Levi H. Thornhill Remembers



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[A member of the Tuskegee Airmen's 302nd fighter squadron, Levi H. Thornhill served overseas during World War II as a propeller specialist and P-47 crew chief. After the War, he graduated in rank from Staff Sergeant to Cadet Lieutenant. In this narrative, Thornhill looks back at his experiences before, during, and after the War--in particular, he explores racial relations before and after the armed forces were integrated.]

To the student:

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

- How was Thornhill able to get accepted into the Tuskegee Institute? What role did his being an African American play in the process?
- After reading his description of the role "community" played while he was in training, as well as overseas, can you correlate his reflections with other ways the concept of "community" benefited African Americans during the Jim Crow era? Do think that integration helped or hindered this sense of community?
- What do you think about the reactions Italians had when they saw African Americans for the first time? How were their reactions influenced by some white, racist members of the American military? Can you extrapolate from Thornhill's description to explore some of the subtle ways the Jim Crow culture came institutionally ingrained in southern attitudes?
- Why didn't the sergeants at the base in Columbus, Ohio, believe that Thornhill knew anything about airplanes?
- Why were some African Americans scared about integrating the armed forces? Do you think they were afraid of losing their sense of community?
- What do you think about Thornhill's passage about blacks being "invisible" in the military after it was integrated? Can you think of instances where this behavior still occurs today and describe them? For instance, have you ever noticed similar behavior in your school or at the shopping mall?

In this passage, Levi Thornhill talks about his early years and how he came to study at the Tuskegee Institute.

I was born and spent most of my life, early years in Virginia ... about nine miles south ... of Appamattox Courthouse. My grandfather owned a farm there. My father had been a Buffalo Soldier ... and he was down in Fort Benning, Georgia in the 24th infantry.... My mother was a school teacher, so I had the good fortune of going, my first years, with her to school ... and I was very, very interested in everything that was going on, reading, and all that. I enjoyed all that stuff. But, we left the farm and moved to Lynchburg, and, there, I went into elementary school through high school. And, after finishing high school, I worked at various and sundry jobs.... So, I got notification that I was going to have to go before the ... selective service. I got my notification. And, I talked to my dad, and I said, "I don't want to be drafted. I really want to go to Tuskegee."

I already knew about it. I used to get the *Pittsburgh Courier*, several of the other black newspapers, and they were talking about it all the time in there.... And, of course, I'd been one of those guys that looked at the sky all the time anyway. I built model planes and read all the pulp magazines I could get that talked about the World War I fighter pilots and all that. So, I wanted a chance to get involved in that.

I went down and said, "I want to enlist." And, I don't like corporals after this experience today. This guy was a corporal, and, here he was, a recruiting chief. So, after he shuffles some papers around on the desk, he says, "We don't have any more openings." And, right off the bat, that didn't sound right to me. I'm saying, " ... Mmm, some quota filling here." And, he says, "Got some openings in the quartermasters. How would you like to drive a brand new six by six?" I'm going, "I don't [want to] drive no truck." And, I had already gone down and taken the examination and passed all of that stuff that you need, the aptitude test and all that. I already had that. And, had scored somewhere around 95, 96. I was set on that. I wanted to go and be around airplanes.

... So, I went back and told my father. ... He knew a fellow there in Lynchburg who knew Hastings ... one of the advisors to President Roosevelt on Black Affairs. Two days later, I get a telephone call from the recruiting office saying come on down." We think we've got an opening." ... So, I got orders.

The sense of community was important to the squadron members' ability to perform well, both in the training camp and while on missions overseas.

... We left there [the training command] in June and went to Chanute field. They selected 120 of this group to go to specialist school for additional training. And, it was three different categories of training that they wanted ... electrician, instrument, or propeller. ... I became a propeller specialist

In October, I had finished, and we were assigned to 302nd fighter squadron at Selfridge Field. Now, the neat thing about it was that all these guys who had been my tent-mates when I first started out, we were still together. And, the way that worked out was, the Colonel, well, he was a Second Lieutenant then, was the commanding officer of the 302nd. That was the last squadron that was activated in the 332nd fighter group. So, I had gone in and asked him about going to pilot training and all of that, and he says, "Hey. You have a specialty. And, you belong to first Air Force. And I'm having trouble now trying to just keep you in the organization. The only way we can keep you in the organization ... " and he's talking to the whole group of that had come straight from specialist school ... and had been assigned to that squadron. He said, "Any of you guys who want to stay then you can stay. But you have to stay as crew chiefs." Fine. So we all did. So that squadron ended up having an abundance of all these guys who were electricians or instrument people and what have you. So, the esprit de corps was there--we'd been together all the time, and so [there was] competition between one another, like, "I'm going to have the best looking airplane, the best running airplane," and all that kind of stuff.

My first support assignment was at Monte Corvino, Italy. We had some P-39s there. I think it was only about two, three weeks at the most, and then we moved to Naples. [We got some P-47s] and the first [one] was mine. We went over to the Adriatic side. And, they flew a few escort missions in the P-47, and that was it. Then, we did something I thought was outstanding ... we transitioned from P-47s to P-51s, I think, in about four or five days. The guys all had flown and what have you, and I think we flew our first escort mission within seven days after we changed over.

I was a mechanic then [and] ... and the relationship [between the pilot and mechanic] was very, very close, I think. Of course, we didn't fraternize with the pilots and what have you, but it was this stiff relationship, like you see in a lot of the Army organizations.... You strapped the pilot in and

you sat on and rode the wing as he was taxiing, so he didn't have to "S" all over the place.... And, I went this whole time...this thing was a real competition deal. You'd sit there, you'd work on your plane and keep the cockpit scrupulously clean, because if a guy's up there and he turns upside down, whatever's on the floor comes up. You can't have that. And, if you're working on the field, there's a lot of mud and stuff. ... Oh, man, [we had a lot of pride in our work]. We'd stand out there and brag and carry on, you know, about the airplane.

Here, Thornhill talks about the black airmen's relations with whites -- with Italians and white members of the U.S. military.

[The Italians had] curiosity, a lot of them, [about my skin color]. I'd get asked, "How did you get these teenie little curls in your hair?" I'd say that I used little teenie little curlers. I'll tell you a story along this line. When we were going over to the Adriatic side, we were all in these trucks. And so, we were going through the mountains ... and we stopped in this little town. At the sound of the trucks, I guess, everybody's closing all their shutters and what have you. And, of course ... little kids are the ones who are curious. And, they come out, and they're looking and what have you. So, we had candy and stuff like that ... [and] start giving it out. Then, they're all over the place. I'm standing talking to my buddy, and this little Italian kid comes up ... I feel this touch on my hand. And, I look around, and these big brown eyes are looking up at me. I know what's happened, see. He touched me on the hand. And, when he thought I wasn't looking ... he looked at his hand ... did a double take at his hand. He was expecting it to come off. So, I was laughing like mad, because it was funny.

Most of the problems we had with the civilian population were because of the white military people that were there.... What would happen [was], let's say there was a bar that they were hanging out at, right? They [white soldiers] didn't want you in there, of course. Then, of course, the Italians who dealt mostly with those guys kind of adopted the same kind of attitude. So, that the blacks usually would go to some bar or something like that where this kind of thing didn't happen, because a majority of the people there were black. And, as a matter of fact, we didn't do that much at all because we built our own club. We'd build our own club at these places. And so, that was where we socialized. And, we had our band there, we'd play, and what have you. That was it.

... Well, I have an experience [and] I'm just going to relate it as it happened. ... It was snowing.... And, the guys didn't think they were going to go off that day. And, the green flare went off, and ... everybody cranked up, and away they went roaring. So, when the fighters got back, there were some bombers ... streaming back ... a lot of them were low on fuel. So, they landed at our base ... [and] we ended up with ... so many airplanes [on the taxi ways]. Now. These guys got to eat, right? And, they don't have any place to stay ... [they're all] white.

So, what happened was ... we had this club, and they came in there ... some of them did. Some of them didn't. We had a couple of guys that slept in their airplanes all night long rather than sharing a tent with us. We had fixed up our tents ... and it was cozy in there, you know? A lot of those guys, [had] no problem, they came on in. And, we were giving them the top off your mess kit; a guy would have his whole dinner in one of those canteen cups. In our tent, we had some interesting conversation with the guys.

But, the funny thing didn't happen then. It happened when I was at rest camp ... in Rome: Mussolini's forum [with] big, square pillars ... [and] benches all the way around them. And, Sam Jacobs and myself ... we were talking. So here, two other guys walk up, and they sat on the other side talking. And, the first few words out of their mouths, you knew where they were from ... they were talking about their missions ... talking about a couple of the raids. And [one of them said], "Oh, man, the flack was so thick you could walk on it ... " So, he was saying that what would happen was when they were being escorted by some of the white groups, the German fighters learned that if you come up towards the bombers, these guys would take off after them. So, they

would turn around the other way, then another set of German fighters from the other side would come over, beat up their plane

One said to the other one, "How many fighter groups are there in the 15th Air Force?" That's how I knew who they were. One says, "Well, there's the first and the 14th, the 31st, the 52nd.... Oh, then there's that nigger outfit." Of course, they didn't know we were around on the other side. So, I kind of sat up a little bit. I look at Jake ... Jake looked at me. And the other guy said, "Man, let me tell you. This is the first time in my life I ever seen a P-51 go straight down." He was on that German's [tail] like white on rice. And the other one says, "Oh yeah. We had those guys. They're in those red tails, right?" Yeah. He says, "We had them, boy. And, when you have them guys for escorts, you can throw away your guns. You don't need them." Now, a six by six come up to take us into town. Jake and I walk around, these two guys walk out. And, they get on this side of the six by six; we get on the other side. And, we're looking at them, and they're looking at us. They know we heard them. So, what I'm trying to say, it was kind of a backhanded compliment.

After the War, Thornhill stayed in the Army and faced other facets of discrimination during the days of segregation.

I wanted to go to school ... to be an aircraft engineer.... I had picked out the University of Chicago was where I wanted to go, but in October, the semester's already started. So, I'd have to wait until the spring semester. And then, they tell me, "Well, you know we have to take in-state veterans before we take out-of-state veterans." So, I was kind of hanging. I didn't know whether I was going to be able to go there or not ... I had thought of the possibilities that the job situation may be tough. So, when I got out of the service, I was a staff sergeant. And, there was a guy standing there at the center that we went to ... and he says, "You know, you ought to enlist in the reserve corps, to protect your rank. Then if things don't look too good, at least you have that, you can come back in the service." So, I had done that. And then ... I found out that the 47th was going to move ... to Lockburg [in] Columbus, Ohio.

I went out to Columbus, Ohio. Then, here comes the experience with the segregation that still existed at that time. I get there, and I'm a staff sergeant. I get my files and go report down to the flight line. The guy in the office there had looked at my 201 file, and he said, "How did you get this military occupation specialty ... " MOS, they called it ... of 750?" I said, I went to school, and that's what I was during the war. Like I'm supposed to be a truck driver, or one of those kinds of things. So anyway, I get down to the flight line, and the place is full of tech sergeants and master sergeants.

... What was on that base at that time was an "all weather" experimental group ... these guys out chasing thunderstorms and all this kind of stuff, collecting data for weather purposes, you know? So, that's the squadron that I had been assigned to. I get in there and ... they didn't know what to do with me. They didn't have the slightest clue. There's a black 750. Where'd he come from? He fell out of the sky or something like that? What are we going to do? So now ... they don't believe that I know anything about airplanes. The guy asks me, "What kind of airplanes [have] you worked on?" "Well, let's see. T-6. P-47, P-51, B-25s ... what else ... " "Oh, you had some experience with B-25s?" Yeah.

Now, the problem is trying to get somebody to agree to take me in his flight. You understand what I'm saying? So, I'm sitting there with nothing to do. This goes on for four or five days. And, I'm reading technical logs, that kind of stuff. So, this master sergeant who was a line chief comes by and says, "You see that B-25 in the hangar out there? It needs a carburetor change on the left engine." Okay. So I go out there--this is something that's supposed to take me all day, or something like that, I guess he figures--I go out there--and I look at this thing, and I said I know damn well I don't have to have all these screws to take this scoop off and all that kind of stuff. All I have to do is disconnect this little rubber boot that joins the scoop to the engine, take that loose, and I can slide the carburetor out.

So, in about less than two hours, I'm sitting on the side of the airplane. And, the guy down there on the ground looks at me like, "Hey. Look at this. Typical. Look at him. Laying on the side of the damn airplane, sleeping, and not even working." I wasn't sleeping. I'm making that up. But, he figured I was goofing off. So he says, "I thought I told you I wanted you to change that carburetor?" I says, " I already have that out, and I'm waiting on a replacement carburetor from supply." "You couldn't have taken it out ... " So first, they said, okay. We're not going to mess with this guy. We're not going to challenge him. So, they left me alone.

African Americans greeted the integration of armed forces with both pride and trepidation.

It finally arrived ... there was no more segregation in the armed forces. Man ... I felt great about it myself, because we proved ourselves, that we could handle this stuff. Practically anything they wanted us to do, we could do.

It impacted me with some amazement when I heard some remarks after he got through speaking. There were some guys who didn't like the idea that they may be assigned to a white organization, and they would be the only black there.... It scared them. And, they said, "I don't want to be integrated into situations like that." If you know what you're doing, I don't see what the problem is. That was my own personal feeling. I said, if you know what you're doing, you know what you can do ... I don't see what difference it makes.

[I became part of an integrated group when] I got accepted [for pilot training in 1949], and I went to Randolph. And, there was ... about a total of about six blacks in the four squadrons. They had four squadrons there. I was in the first squadron. And, there was one black in the first squadron with me ... another black in the second squadron ... another in the third. So, we didn't see much of one another, because you just didn't.... I did notice, when you say that it was integrated, is that, to some white people, if you're black, you're invisible. They don't see you. So, I'm a cadet officer now. And, the purpose of hazing, as I understood it, was to get across to some of the underclassmen certain procedures that you were supposed to have engrained in you. You were supposed to clear the area, which was, you spread your arms and you spread your legs and you look up, you look right, you look left, you look down; in other words, in an airplane, you are always looking around. You always have to look around to see what's going on. So, that's what it was supposed to be for.

Well, I had an upperclassman, but he was two classes below me. And, as you were coming out of the mess hall ... that was a favorite spot [for an underclassman] to grab a cadet, an underclassman and work him over, you know. So, he was catching them all as they came out ... and lining them up ... really giving them holy hell. And, I walked past. I have bars on my shoulder, three stripes and what have you

He's white. And, he's really giving these underclassmen, who are white to, really giving them a hard time. Which had nothing to do with what he was supposed to be doing. My feeling was that upperclassmen are supposed to help the lower classmen. So anyway, I walked past

So now, he's supposed to be aware of everything that's going on around him. That's one of the things that they've been teaching you all the time, right? An ... officer doesn't walk by without being saluted. That [rank] is what he [the person saluting] is showing recognition for. And so, he never stopped ... he sees a black face, and he ain't looking at nothing else. And, that happens a lot

So, I went ... "MISTER!" He rotates around. "To my room afterwards. You're dismissed." ... I got him up there, and I was telling him, "Hey." He's being sadistic about it. "You're not here for that purpose. You have been where they are. And, the deal of it is, you're supposed to help the

underclassmen, not just harass them for whatever kick you get out of it. So, I think you're going to walk this weekend to reinforce that thought ... "

Thornhill advises students to use the tools at their disposal and not allow obstacles to stop them from pursuing their dreams.

Here's what I say to students when I talk to [them]. And I say, I'm a mechanic. Good tools are essential if you're going to do a good job. If somebody is paying you to do that good job, that's what he expects. Now, education is a tool. And, you need that for all of the things that you're going to do living and helping others. Because that's where the importance comes ... if you can help improve somebody else, or help somebody else, you've done what you are here for. And, the other thing I tell them [is] ... dreams are very important. You may not get a chance to realize your dream when you think you're ready, but [you should] never give up. I ended up doing what I really wanted to do. And, I love it. How many people in the world can say that they had a job doing what they really wanted to do ... and, incidentally got paid enough to keep both ends held together?

[My dreams were] not frustrated [by being a black man in America]. There were obstacles. And, obstacles only frustrate if you don't do anything about it. You've got choices when you have an obstacle. You can go over it, around it, under it, or what have you. That's your responsibility to do ... to get where you are going. And, your dream is where you are trying to go. That's it. Very simple.