

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Roger "Bill" Terry Remembers



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[Roger "Bill" Terry, a native of Southern California, earned his pilot's wings at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama during World War II. In this narrative, Terry describes his experience in the Jim Crow South, how it altered his outlook and led him to fight discrimination in the Armed Forces. He is a college graduate from UCLA, received his law degree from Southwestern University, and served as the President of the Tuskegee Airmen.]

To the student:

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

- Why wasn't Bill Terry accepted into the Air Force when he first applied? How does this reflect the military culture of the time?
- Why did the white pilot from the University of Wyoming say that white pilots couldn't have made it through the Tuskegee Institute's training program successfully? Why do you think the training there was so rigorous? How did this training benefit the Tuskegee Airmen? Why does he describe the white military instructors as both "good" and as the "opposition?"
- Can you describe Mr. Terry's reaction to the climate in the South? What was he reacting to? How did his experience there affect his outlook on life? Why do you think some southerners reacted differently?
- Why wasn't Terry concerned about being arrested for his action of civil disobedience in Indiana? Can you describe the role Eleanor Roosevelt played in desegregating the military? Why was she not able to help Bill Terry?
- After reading this narrative, can you list the various ways, both overtly and subtly, that African Americans in the military resisted or coped with discrimination? How do you think their actions were or were not helpful?

Roger "Bill" Terry describes his first attempt to join the Air Force.

My name is Roger C. Terry, and I'm known as "Bill" Terry. I was born in California... went to high school in Compton...and to college at UCLA. I finished UCLA at the age of 19 before the war.... Everybody was white [at UCLA]...everybody was white [in school] except at Compton J.C., I think there were about 40 Negro students there, colored students there. And, four of them were my brothers. It was just that way. We had a completely...well, a united nations, really...neighborhood that we lived in. See, I lived in this neighborhood...and, there's Mammy Clark. She was a white lady, an old white lady. We called her Mammy Clark...and the Chinamen lived over here, and the Tagouris lived right over here. They were well known.... And, Butch owned a whole lot of the property around there. He was quite prosperous....

I've been a product of Southern California. My participation in World War II would be the same as any person who was born in Southern California in 1921 with the exception of the fact that we suffered the pains of segregation and discrimination.

I went into the Air Force in 1941 after the war started. They had an advertisement in the *Daily Bruin*, which is the UCLA paper, asking for candidates for the Air Force. And I, along with about 1,000 other fellows, we signed up for the Air Force. We took the examination for pilot...I think about 700 of us passed it. And then...about 500 of us passed [the physical]. After we passed it, they set a date to swear us in. And, the Colonel, in looking over...the applications, he saw that I was a basketball player, and it was basketball season. Ken Forbes was a basketball player, and he had been kept under the football team. So, he [the Colonel] thought that he should swear in the two athletes, since the Bruin athletes joined the Air Force. And so, the day came, three days later, and I went before the camera...and he swore us into the Air Force. About four days later, he called me up and said, "Would you come and see the Colonel?" "When I went to see [him], he said, "Why didn't you tell us you were colored?" I said, "You didn't ask me. And, it wasn't on the papers; therefore, I didn't know about it. What difference does it make?" He said, "Well, I don't know. But, you wait until you hear from the Air Force." And so, I waited for about a month, and I got a paper saying that I was too big...I weighed too much. I was 6 foot 2½ [inches] and [weighed] 175 pounds, in the best physical condition I could be in....

After arriving at Tuskegee, Bill Terry learned the art of flying--and the ways of the South in the Jim Crow era.

Anyway, I finished college...with no place to go--they couldn't draft me, because you had to be 21 to be drafted...I couldn't get a job because of the fact that I was 1-A. And then, I got a telephone call from a man...and [he] said, "If you can come to Tuskegee, we'll teach you how to fly, and we'll make an instructor out of you." So, I borrowed some money...and I bought myself a helmet, goggles, and everything. And, off I went to Tuskegee.

...Somebody met me there and said, "Well, you're the guy that came from California. You're to sleep in the first emery...." So, I went to bed and, about two hours later, [heard] the damnedest noise..."Onward Christian Soldiers" and all that. I ran to the window and looked...here comes the whole school. It was the band first, then the president, then the vice presidents...then all the girls, and then all the boys. And, they were all dressed in uniforms...on their way to chapel. I knew, then, that I had reached...Beulahland, so to speak.... So, with little to do about it, I went to breakfast.... And, [one of the guys] asked me, "I beg your pardon, do you have any cigarettes?" I just happened to have a package of Old Gold...and I didn't smoke. So, I said, "Here." He said, "I don't smoke that type." Therefore, I'm getting hip to what they like and what they don't like.

Then, we went to dinner...in the dining hall. It was a white hall. And, all the men were at one end, and all the women were at the other end. I said, "What is this?" He said, "There's no mixing on Sunday. At two o'clock...on the lawn...we can talk to the girls, but you can't sit down, you can't talk to them, you know. I mean, you can talk to them, but you can't touch, etc. I was first integrated to the folk ways of the South and the attitudes of the people...and I didn't like it from the beginning. It was anti-social, as far as I was concerned, and it was completely unacceptable to me, because I had grown up in California. I was born here and went to school here. I felt that my existence or my ability to cope and to answer any situation that might come to bear was...due to my particular capacity to take care of the incident, because when I went into the service...I went in with a bunch of the guys that I knew at college. They were already...flying here, flying there, other places. They had gone into the service as candidates for officers' positions in the Navy. And, I had just as much ability as they had. I felt that I had the capacity to exist and to either excel or not excel due to the particular field in which we were competing.

...When I got involved, we knew that [the Tuskegee experience was the result of pressure by the NAACP.] But, we felt that from the beginning that they were going to allow us to fly with the rest of

them. We didn't know that it was going to be separate and equal...separate and unequal. We didn't know that we would be completely isolated from the point of view of somebody who had seen combat, had done other things with the air force. We felt that the 99th, once they had proven that they could fly, that we would be integrated. And then, we found out that we were wrong. I think I found out the third class.... The first class was five guys, the second class was two, and the third was three, and we figured out that they weren't going to have many more. I was down there, I was learning to fly, and I don't think that they thought we would ever go into combat...that we would ever be anything but a token to say that, yeah...so we let you fly, and that's it.

...The ones that first taught you how to fly, the ones that gave you the introduction to flying, were Negroes.... We would take our primary training there [and] we would fly, I think it was, 80 hours. Then, if we completed that, we went to basic. That's when we got our first flight with [white] military personnel. We flew the BT-13...about 80 or 90 hours. We got our introduction to the use of the radio. We learned how to use flaps. We learned how to use prop pitch.... Then, we went to primary...that's when we got our [white] military instructors. And, I will say that they were good instructors. They were tough. It was, [well] you've heard of the situation where they say stand in line and say, "Look to the right of you, look to the left of you. Two of you won't be here." Well, we thought that was a joke, but it wasn't.... We started with 83 in my class and we finished with 14 fighter pilots and seven twin-engine pilots. That's 21 out of 83...less than a fourth.

...I know one [white pilot]. He played basketball with me, [he] went to the University of Wyoming when I went to UCLA. He was a P-38 pilot; he just went through, you know. When I told him what we did to get our wings, he said, "Hell, we never would have made it." See, what happened was, at Tuskegee you flew BTs, ATs, B-25s, P-40s...off the same damn field. And, if you weren't astute, and if you weren't on the ball, you really got washed out. I can recall coming in one day, and I'm getting ready to land. And, the guy said, "AT-10, pull up and go around. There's a B-25 on your tail." I pulled out. You had to give way. The AT-10 gave way to the B-25, the B-25 gave way to the fighter, the P-40...in other words, you had to know your pecking order when you came in to land, and you had to know how to get out of there.... Well, if you messed up, like one of my friends--I guess he didn't know that the guy was coming with his P-40 and just shaved his tail off, and he was dead. But, we were lucky. We had very few accidents. I think we had one of the best records in the world. And another thing that a lot of people don't realize, we had the best of ground crews. In fact, I never worried about getting in an airplane, whether an airplane would quit on me. I was worried about getting it up and getting it down....

...My best memory [of my training at Tuskegee] was when I got my wings. That was a sense of accomplishment.... After that, nothing seemed to matter. I didn't go any place during my training so that I would run into any of the effects of segregation. I just concentrated on trying to get my wings. ...So you stayed on the field...and, I think, the only time I went off the field was when my grandmother died, and I went to the funeral.... But, all of your work was within this field and within this little town. You were surrounded by Negroes all the time, and you saw the white folks, they were the instructors, but they were the opposition. Whether you believe it or not, they were the opposition. They helped us, and they were all volunteers...that was one thing. But, we felt that you had to learn, and if you didn't learn, then you'd get cut off.

And so, when I got my wings, I came home. For the first time in my life, I...took a girl to the theater and didn't have but three weeks or two weeks or something like that. I found myself counting the number of colored people to see who was with me and who was against me. And, that meant that I had changed my whole outlook on life, because, prior to that time, it really didn't effect me as to how many colored people there were, how many white people there were, unless somebody was going to start a fight or something like that, then I would have to count the odds. But, I'd count the odds no matter where I went. And, I found out that after that experience, I continued to count the odds for me and...against me and to figure out strategically how I was going to get out of some place and how to get into it. It was definitely a change in my attitude.... It

was just the idea that I had never been any place where there was a percentage count, where you figured where the hell your place was. I resented it. I resented it to the core of my being that they would have the temerity to set up a standard that, perhaps, I should meet. We (my buddies and I) all felt the same way except for a few who were southerners. But, we always talked about finding out whether we were full fledged officers or whether or not we were tokens, and we wanted to prove to them that we were as good as they were, in fact, much better than most of them.

After his squadron was selected for an overseas assignment, Terry encountered more discrimination, even though President Roosevelt had outlawed segregation at recreational facilities on military bases. In this passage, Terry describes his response and the consequences he suffered as a result of his action.

[After I got my wings, we were sent to] ...Goodman Field, Kentucky. It was an auxiliary field for Ft. Knox. And then, there were two squadrons of this group that were in Atterbury...in Indiana. Then, there was the other section that was down there in Walterboro, South Carolina, where we would go for gunnery, bombing etc., so, we were scattered. And so, they decided that we were going to go overseas. Finally, MacArthur...asked for the best-trained B-25 squadron in the country. And, they said it was the 477th. But, they're colored, and most of the generals and the commanders of the U.S. Air Force over there, they said they didn't want the colored group coming...because they would disrupt the harmony of the [Forces].... But, MacArthur said, "To hell with what you like and what you want. I want the best-trained one, and we will take the 477th."

So...they decided that we would go to Freeman Field, Indiana, and, there, we would have the whole group together, and we could make plans, etc. So, we sent a cadre, about eight or nine officers and 20 enlisted men...they went up...looked it over, and they said what could be used, this, that, and the other. But, when they came back, they reported to us, and when I say "us," I say we were very much aware of it. We're going to go overseas...to fight, and we're going to die, well okay. But, we're going to find out whether or not we're full-fledged officers and whether or not we're full-fledged Americans. And, so he set this up so that he's got officer's club number two, that's for "you guys," and officer's club number one for the white guys...and we found out...we could go to officer's club number two, but we couldn't go to the PX, we couldn't go to the officer's club, we couldn't go to the bowling alley, and we couldn't go to the theater. And I said, well to hell with that. Roosevelt has signed this Executive Order 210-10, paragraph A and B, saying there would be no discrimination, no segregation at any recreational facility of any Army, Navy, or Marine base in the country.

...So, we ended up at Freeman Field. The train backed in, and we all got out and got our billets and everything. We set up a table to make sure that all the guys that went to the officer's club were in good uniform, their fingernails were clean, they hadn't been drinking, all this stuff. So, here we are...and we sent...three people at a time to go down, get arrested, and come back. So, they went down, got arrested and...I think...I was the 62nd guy, or something like that. I went down there, and the guy said, "Well, you can't come in." ...I said, "Well, why not?" And he said, "All you trainees..." I said, "How do you know we're trainees?" He said, "Well to be frank, no niggers can come in." So, I had a little bit of reluctance...I went over to him. I...walked by and went in, and there was a Major in there. He took my name and all my credentials and sent me back under arrest. So, that was okay, because that's what I was looking for, to be arrested. The next day, we sent some guys down there, and they closed it before they got there. I'll never forget this guy's statement. He said, "You got to be swift. You got to be quick." And so, we didn't worry about being arrested, because we knew...Franklin D. Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt was very instrumental in us getting to fly.

We knew we had a friend...Bill Parker, whose mother was the chief housekeeper at the White House, and a friend of Eleanor's. And we knew if we could get Bill Parker to Washington DC...he was just a working officer...a first Lieutenant...an MP, I think. He was with us. We...said...would he

talk to his mama? His mama would talk to Eleanor. Eleanor would talk to Franklin, and Franklin would say, "Let my people free," see? But, it didn't happen that way. Franklin was feeling a little tired. He was having a little R&R down in Warm Springs, Georgia.... Anyway, by the time we got there, they weren't communicating between the White House and Hyde Park.

And so, Bill went to the White House and told his mother. His mother had to get on the train and go to Hyde Park to tell Mrs. Roosevelt. That takes a couple of days...by the time we got him there and everything. He told her, and then, by the time she got in touch with Roosevelt, the old joke was that he said, "The Nazi's are over here on the western front, and Hirohito's boys on the eastern front, now the Negroes." And he gave up, and he died, see? That was a bad day. Here I am...waiting on Roosevelt, that he would do the right thing, and he's dead. And what do we have? We have Harry Truman. And Harry Truman was a Pendergast man, he was a southerner...he was the boss, and he was a southerner. And as far as I could determine, he didn't believe in integration. I thought that he didn't. And, I was very wrong. He believed in integration, but he didn't believe in social freedom of action. But, he did desegregate the army in 1948.

So, I stayed in jail.... There were 101 of us. They wrote up a directive saying that I read and understood regular orders, and I could only go in such-and-such a place. And, 101 guys refused to sign it. So...they moved all of these officers...back to Goodman Field. And, they had the other guys pack up their stuff, because they were going to go back to wherever they came from.... These other two guys that they picked out to say that they were the leaders of this insurrection...they flew them back to Goodman Field, where they had barbed wire fence all the way around this compound. They did have recreational facilities, they could play cards, etc. But, they were not working--they were not doing anything. And, they [the Air Force] did something that the Japanese couldn't do and the Germans couldn't do. They put two complete groups of airmen out of action.

Finally, after a couple of weeks, they flew me back down to Goodman Field and put me in another room. [They] put a man outside the door with a gun and, on the hour, every hour, they would come in and ask me who I was. "Who are you?" "Second Lieutenant Roger B. Terry, 0841165." They would do that. And, if I wanted to go to the bathroom, I'd have to knock on the door. The guard would open the door, and I'd say, "I'd like to go to the latrine." ...He couldn't take me to the latrine; the officer of the guard had to be there. And, of course, the officer wouldn't come right away. He wouldn't come running. He would just wait. So, I got smarter than they did. I'd wait an hour before I got ready to go to the toilet, and I'd ask for somebody; by the time they got there, I was ready. Then, they'd take me down to the bathroom...and you had to use the bathroom with the guy standing there with the gun. It was just debilitating, really, and discouraging....

They finally charged me. And I said, "You've got to charge me within seven days. The articles of war have to be presented to me." They didn't say anything but about 14, 15, 16 days, they charged me with mutiny, treason, inciting to riot, disobeying a direct order, jostling, and conduct unbecoming of an officer. So, it went on for about a month or two months.... But, the other guys, they went back to work. They were given reprimands, and there were only three of us left under arrest. And then, I guess, it got all tied up...they said, 'What the hell, you've got all these guys, you've got 900 and something pilots, and they're not doing anything...'

They sent for Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. They got him from overseas, and they brought him back, and...he took over command of the 477th. That was the first time that a Negro had command of any facility in the United States Army.... Before that, there was always somebody who was in his class, in the class above him, or something like that. He was in command of the group, but he was never in command of the facility, which covered all of the area surrounding it. So, he came back...and, the white folks, they were working in Air Corps supply. They found out he...he's bringing a whole colored command with him, and they said, "We refuse to work for him." That's one thing I can say for him. Davis was not phased one bit by it. He sent for ...two companies of [black] WACS [from Des Moines, Iowa,] and brought them there right away. And, they [the whites]

said, "Well, now we'll go to work for you!" And, he said, "No. It's too late. We've already got your replacements..."

Well, anyway, I was court-martialed...I was convicted, and I stayed convicted for 50 years and one month. And, after 50 years, I was president of the Tuskegee Airmen, and General Fogelman was the main speaker at our convention in Atlanta, and the Secretary of the Air Force was there, and Secretary of Defense...I was given a full pardon, and I restored my rank, etc. For the first time in 50 years, I could vote, I could hold office, I was restored to my rank of Second Lieutenant, and it only goes to show that we're a nation of laws. If you wait long enough, you will be vindicated. The only thing is that they wasted so much money and so much time doing it. But, we did show them that we could fly.

Based on his experiences as a Tuskegee Airman, Roger "Bill" Terry has some advice for young students.

Well, I would like to say that you should take advantage of your educational facilities and prepare yourself, so if the chance comes where you have to prove yourself, you will be able to do it. Nothing suffices except education and learning how to do whatever you want to do under the proper circumstances. It's kind of tough to say, but...the [African-American] girls have learned it and the boys haven't learned that they have to be prepared. And, most of them are thinking about basketball or football or so doing this, that, and the other and making a fast buck. What is really important is to be solid in your family background and in your education. And then, the sky's the limit.