

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jim Tilmon

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Tilmon, Jim
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon,
Dates:	August 15, 2005, January 28, 2003 and September 30, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2003 and 2005
Physical Description:	12 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:49:39).
Abstract:	Airplane pilot and television reporter Jim Tilmon (1934 - 2021) hosted, 'Our People,' on WTTW Chicago, the first television show produced by and for African Americans. In addition to his television activities, Tilmon was an accomplished commercial pilot, earning him the Captain's Chair Award from American Airlines, the title of honorary captain from United Airlines, and the naming of an aviator's navigation point after him by the Federal Aviation Administration. Tilmon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 15, 2005, January 28, 2003 and September 30, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_023
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Jim Tilmon, aviation expert, local Emmy-winning newscaster, and accomplished musician, was born on July 31, 1934, in Guthrie, Oklahoma. Tilmon earned his B.A. degree in music from Lincoln University in Missouri, and served in the United States Army Corps of Engineers for eight years, earning the rank of captain.

Tilmon's interest in flying carried him from the U.S. Army to American Airlines in 1965, where he became the airline's third African American commercial pilot and the country's fifth. Tilmon spent twenty-nine years with American Airlines before retiring; his talent earned him the Captain's Chair Award from American Airlines; inspired United Airlines to grant him the title of honorary captain; and compelled the FAA to name an aviator's navigation point after him.

While still piloting aircrafts, Tilmon set another precedent by hosting the first live weekly magazine show developed for and by African Americans. 'Our People,' premiered one week after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Tilmon's guests included notable politicians, artists, and activists, such as Harold Washington, author James Baldwin, and jazz vocalist Johnny Hartman. After four years at WTTW, Tilmon became a weather forecaster and aviation and science reporter at Chicago's NBC affiliate. Tilmon appeared on numerous national programs, including: 'Hardball,' 'NBC Nightly News,' and 'Nightline.'

In addition to his aviation activities, Tilmon stayed involved with music by performing and creating original music for television motion pictures, and other audio and video productions. Tilmon also recorded a symphony- and orchestra-infused relaxation CD, 'Angel Whispers,' in 2003.

Tilmon was awarded a Chicago Emmy in 1974 and was nominated for a National Emmy and the Illinois Associated Press and Illinois United Press International awards for excellence in reporting and broadcasting. In 2002, the Chicago Chapter of National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences presented Tilmon with the Silver Circle Award for twenty-five years in television.

In 1994, Tilmon retired from the airlines and NBC and moved to Arizona, where he continued to do on-air aviation reporting. In 2002, Tilmon returned to Chicago as a weather forecaster and aviation reporter and analyst for the CBS affiliate. In 2004, Tilmon was inducted into the Chicago Senior Citizens Hall of Fame, and was awarded the Luminary Senior Award for his impact on social and cultural life in the City of Chicago.

Tilmon and his wife, Joan Tilmon, raised three children.

Jim Tilmon was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 28, 2003.

Tilmon passed away on January 16, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jim Tilmon was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 15, 2005, January 28, 2003 and September 30, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 12 Betacame SP videocassettes. Airplane pilot and television reporter Jim Tilmon (1934 - 2021) hosted, 'Our People,' on WTTW Chicago, the first television show produced by and for African Americans. In addition to his television activities, Tilmon was an accomplished commercial pilot, earning him the Captain's Chair Award from American Airlines, the title of honorary captain from United Airlines, and the naming of an aviator's navigation point after him by the Federal Aviation Administration.

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:

Tilmon, Jim

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Tilmon, Jim --Interviews

African American air pilots--Interviews.

African American television journalists--Interviews

African American television personalities--Interviews

African Americans in television broadcasting

Childhood

Discrimination in education--Oklahoma

Segregation in education--Oklahoma

Indians of North America--Oklahoma

Native Americans

Mentoring

Mentoring in the professions

Howard University

Tennessee State University

United States. Army Air Forces

African Americans--Relations with Indians

United States. Air Force--African Americans

Aeronautics

School music--Instruction and study

Chemistry

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Airplane Pilot

Meteorologist

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Jim Tilmon, August 15, 2005, January 28, 2003 and September 30, 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 Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_001_001, TRT: 0:29:13 ?

Pilot and television personality James Tilmon describes his family background and recalls memories from his childhood growing up in Oklahoma. Tilmon talks about his parents, both of whom were educators, and tells of the discrimination they faced when schools in Oklahoma were integrated. Tilmon also discusses his childhood interest in aviation, and his ambition to become an airline pilot.

African American air pilots--Interviews.

African American television journalists--Interviews.

African American television personalities--Interviews.

African Americans in television broadcasting.

Children--Oklahoma.

Discrimination in education--Oklahoma.

Segregation in education--Oklahoma.

Indians of North America--Oklahoma.

Native Americans.

Mentoring.

Mentoring in the professions.

Howard University.

Tennessee State University.

United States. Army Air Forces.

African Americans--Relations with Indians.

United States. Air Force--African Americans.

Aeronautics.

School music--Instruction and study.

Chemistry.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_001_002, TRT: 0:31:17 ?

James Tilmon recalls his childhood growing up in Oklahoma, describing the African American community in Boley, Oklahoma; his experiences with the Native American community; and his best friend from childhood. Tilmon then details the beginnings of his lifelong obsession with aviation, starting out by drawing airplanes while in school. Tilmon skips forward in his chronology, telling how he became a mentor to aspiring African American pilots.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_001_003, TRT: 0:29:56 ?

James Tilmon details his high school experience in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, focusing particularly on his extracurricular activities. Tilmon tells of his enrollment at Howard University, where he excelled in the chemistry department. Tilmon then discusses his subsequent transfer to Tennessee State University, and explains why he changed majors from chemistry to music. From there, Tilmon describes his service in the U.S. Air Force, explaining how he overcame discrimination and racism to become a pilot and an officer.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_002_004, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Jim Tilmon began his pilot training at Camp Gary, Texas with the U.S. Army Aviation Branch in 1959, where he successfully avoided a near collision with

another trainee pilot during a routine training examination. For tactical and instrument training, Tilmon was transferred to Fort Rucker, Alabama. There, he faced discrimination on frequent stops at civilian airports who insisted that he eat in the kitchen or refused to serve him outright. Upon graduating from flight school, Tilmon joined the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, where he received top secret clearance, and flew a plane with classified topographical mapping equipment. During one flight session, Tilmon found himself caught in a valley during a storm. With help from the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Coast Guard, he was guided to safety. Additionally, Tilmon describes his reasons for not reporting racism in his flight school; and he also recalls flying into an airfield in Culpepper, Virginia that displayed the Confederate flag.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_002_005, TRT: 0:29:01 ?

Jim Tilmon navigated a plane with classified topographic mapping technology from Culpepper, Virginia to Yuma, Arizona. On his return, it was revealed that the technology had been sold to Russia three years prior, and was no longer classified. In 1962, Tilmon began training as a helicopter pilot before being stationed in Hanau, Germany. There, gasthaus taverns were racially segregated amongst military forces; however, in Langendiebach, Germany, Tilmon was treated well, and he learned of the town's close relationship with African American soldiers in World War II. In October of 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Tilmon was ordered to prepare for war with Russia and Eastern Germany. Prior to his return to Fort Benning, Georgia in 1965, Tilmon participated in a military music group that toured Germany. Tilmon describes his experiences while learning to fly helicopters, and his encounters with black Germans and his impression of racial divisions in Germany compared to the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_002_006, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Jim Tilmon was stationed in Hanau, Germany, where he was under the command of John C.H. Lee, Jr. Given a short time to relocate aircraft for the arrival of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963, Tilmon created a makeshift airfield at the Campo Pond Training Area that served as an airport for U.S. military aircraft as well as international diplomats. Tilmon returned to the United States in 1965, where he was assigned to the 11th Air Assault Division Test unit at Fort Benning, Georgia. In light of the events on Bloody Sunday, his unit were placed on standby to protect the marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. At Fort Benning, Tilmon was demoted from his position of captain to that of a public information officer by his racist battalion commander. In this role, he spoke to the press in various towns while in route to Watertown, New York. During a stop, Tilmon met news media professionals Adam Lynch and Regis Bobonis, Sr. who encouraged him to work for American Airlines, Inc.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_002_007, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Jim Tilmon was contacted by Regis Bobonis, Sr. and Adam Lynch after a helicopter crash during a military training operation at Fort Benning, Georgia, which further spurred Tilmon's interest in becoming a pilot for American Airlines, Inc. In 1965, Tilmon applied for the position; and after passing the Standard nine exam and overcoming some complications with his physical, he was accepted for training contingent upon his exit from the U.S. Army. Tilmon's commander threatened him, and expressed that he would never leave the U.S. Army before serving in the Vietnam War. The commanding officer also delayed Tilmon's discharge papers, until Tilmon gained support from Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Afterwards, Tilmon entered the American Airlines Cadet

Academy to train with commercial jets. There, he was partnered with fellow pilot, Ray LeCont, who challenged a white barber for refusing to cut Tilmon's hair in Dallas, Texas. Tilmon also recalls choosing Chicago, Illinois as his headquarters.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_003_008, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

Jim Tilmon struggled to acquire housing in Chicago, Illinois because of racial profiling. With the help of two realtors, Tilmon was able to find a home for his family in the village of Highland Park, Illinois, which had recently initiated an open housing ordinance. In one of Tilmon's early flights, he flew with racist pilot, Ernie Saviano, who refused to speak to Tilmon directly. An attempt was also made to sabotage Tilmon's position as a flight engineer when Saviano and a mechanic tampered with the plane's spark plugs. At this point in the interview, Tilmon describes his favorite plane to fly, the British Aircraft Corporation One-Eleven, and his positive but embarrassing experience flying with pilot W.H. "Bud" Barry on short hop flights across the Midwest and Northeastern U.S. He also talks about discriminatory hiring practices at United Airlines, and challenges with race and gender diversity in the airline industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_003_009, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

Jim Tilmon searched for supplemental income during his first year as a pilot. After fundraising with Project Wingspread, he volunteered to produce an all-black television program with Edward L. Morris. With assistance from Adam Lynch and Regis Bobonis, Sr., television writer Rift Fournier became Tilmon's producer, and helped him develop the show's format. His show, 'Our People' was successful and featured interviews with Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Ella Fitzgerald, Nancy Wilson and Sammy Davis, Jr., but was ultimately not purchased by a network. Tilmon continued to run the show, even after certain sponsors pulled their funding. In the early 1970s, Tilmon joined WMAQ-TV in Chicago, Illinois as the creator of the local community show, 'Tilmon Tempo'; and in 1974, he became a weather broadcaster for the station. Tilmon also describes the use of graphic artists and technology in meteorology prior to the invention of the chroma key. In addition, Tilmon recalls the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_003_010, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Jim Tilmon was featured in the Chicago Tribune in 1983 for his accomplishments as a pilot and television personality. During this time, Tilmon also started a production company, and acquired most of his business from the 8(a) Business Development Program. Shortly after the death of his brother in 1983, Tilmon's mother, Manila Hazel Tilmon, had a severe stroke that left her incontinent prior to her death. With mounting medical expenses for both of his parents in addition to his own expenses, Tilmon was encouraged to declare bankruptcy, after which he was accused of bank fraud, although he was later acquitted. Also in 1983, Tilmon was in a car accident that left him with benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, which threatened his pilot career. Additionally, Tilmon describes his interactions with his co-pilot on his first flight as a captain with American Airlines, Inc. He also talks about the murder of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark as well as the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_003_011, TRT: 0:30:05 ?

Jim Tilmon was in a vehicular accident in 1983 that left him with benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, which subsequently ended his flying career. At this point in the interview, Tilmon describes his long recovery from the condition. From 1972 to 1994, Tilmon worked at WMAQ-TV in Chicago, Illinois, where he hosted the television show 'Tilmon Tempo' and became a

weatherman in 1974. When his contract was not renewed by the station's general manager Pat Wallace, supporters of Tilmon, which included the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, threatened to boycott the station, but Tilmon stopped them. Shortly thereafter, he was rehired, although he left in 1994. Concurrently, Tilmon created a production company, The Tilmon Group, LLC, and moved to Scottsdale, Arizona to build the company. There, he produced a musical album, 'Angel Whispers,' and faced financial setbacks with his business after the events of September 11, 2001. Tilmon's wife, Joan Tilmon, then encouraged him to help revitalize WBBM-TV in Chicago, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Tilmon, Section A2003_023_003_012, TRT: 0:21:38 ?

Jim Tilmon was hired by general manager, Joe Ahern, at WBBM-TV in 2002, where he anchored the four o'clock news in Chicago, Illinois. Three years later, Tilmon retired from broadcasting and returned to Phoenix, Arizona. As a television personality and accomplished pilot, Tilmon was interviewed on television shows like 'NBC Nightly News' and 'Nightline' as well as networks like CNN, MSNBC and Fox News. At this point in the interview, Jim Tilmon reflects on his life and legacy. He also describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community, his family and how he would like to be remembered.