

Interviewer:

Good afternoon, sir. Thanks for joining us here today. It's 5 April 2016 and we're here in Thayer Hall. If you could please, sir, introduce yourself and spell your first and last name for us.

Percy Squire:

My name is Percy Squire. My first name is spelled P-E-R-C-Y, my last name is spelled S-Q-U-I-R-E.

Interviewer:

Okay, sir. And you graduated class of 1972 from West Point, correct?

Percy Squire:

Yes, that is correct.

Interviewer:

Great. So to start off with, if you don't mind tell us a little bit about yourself and your family growing up before you came to West Point. So tell us a little bit about growing up.

Percy Squire:

I was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio. My dad was a native of Youngstown. He was actually born in North Carolina but went to Youngstown as a very small child because my grandparents were both involved in the steel industry. My mom's family came from Marianna, Arkansas, my dad's family came from Garysburg, North Carolina, and in the second decade of the Twentieth Century they were part of that great migration of workers who went to Ohio and other locations in order to find jobs in the heavy industries. Both my granddads were steel workers. My mom was born in Youngstown and my dad, as I indicated, was raised there.

Both of their fathers were steel workers, worked for the steel mills in Youngstown, Ohio, and I was born and raised there.

Interviewer:

So did anyone in your family have a history or any military experience?

Percy Squire:

My dad's father was in the 365th Infantry Regiment in World War I.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

Mustered into service from Camp Grant, Illinois and he fought with the French at the Meuse-Argonne, Saint-Mihiel and other places. He was a - the 365th Infantry Regiment at that time had a machine gun company. It wasn't part of the United States Army. What they did with black soldiers at that point was they put them in what was called the United States National Army, and I have the company photo of my granddad's unit. My granddad was a private at the time, he was a gunner. They used water-cooled 30 caliber machine guns drawn by mules and they fought with the French during World War I. My mother had a brother - several brothers - who were in the service during the Second World War and I had one uncle who actually was a career NCO and spent his entire, you know, adult life in the military.

But for the most part my family was involved in the steel industry. Yeah.

Interviewer>

Okay. So what was your education like through the elementary and high school years in Youngstown? What do you remember of that?

Percy Squire:

I attended public school. I went to primary school at a school called Madison from first through sixth and then I went to an inner city high school, East High School, in Youngstown, Ohio, and I - throughout my primary and secondary education I was educated in the public schools, and the public school system at that point, unlike now, was - offered the opportunity for a person to receive a very adequate and excellent education. You know, there were so many things that were different about the public schools at that time than

there are now; prayer and like in schools and so forth, teachers had the ability to discipline students, and so it was a much different experience than what unfortunately the children have to cope with now.

Interviewer:

What about sports? Were you involved in sports in school?

Percy Squire:

Yeah. I ran track, played football and - throughout high school. I played, you know, every year right up - including when I came to West Point, frankly.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you mentioned West Point and I know - you told me off camera earlier today so I know a little bit about this but I wanted to ask you, how did you become aware of West Point and how did that opportunity get presented to you that eventually brought you here?

Percy Squire:

I came to West Point by default, frankly. I had an interest in attending a service academy but I had focused on the Naval Academy for reasons that were totally unrelated to anything academically. I wanted to go to the Baltimore area because there were individuals who I knew that were going to Morgan State and stuff - and the like - and my father, who happened to have been an extremely outstanding athlete, unfortunately my dad was unable to become a professional athlete because of circumstances, the limited opportunities when he was at that age, but he was still a well-known very excellent athlete in and around Youngstown. And my dad told me from a very early age that given the opportunity to earn a scholarship that I should expect to pay my own way to college.

And so from a very early age I was looking for ways to finance my education because the alternative was to go to work in the steel mill which I wasn't particularly interested in, and I was attempting to go to the Naval Academy. I was fortunate through some channels that had opened up for me because I was heavily involved in the Boy Scouts. I was put in contact with some local political people in Mahoning County, which is where Youngstown was located. I was in a session one Saturday - one afternoon with the chairman of the local Democratic Party who contacted our congressman at that time from Ohio, Michael J. Kirwan, to pursue appointment to the Naval Academy. I don't know what the circumstances are now but at that point I think members of Congress were limited to five persons attending the Academy at any one time.

And the quota for Naval Academy appointees was full and the congressman asked me if I was interested in perhaps going to West Point, and it was quite late in my senior year, I had devoted a lot of time to try to get an appointment and I was delighted to accept, although I actually wasn't trying to go to West Point. But in retrospect, it was a much better choice for me than the Navy would've been.

Interviewer:

So when he presented that opportunity of would you like to go to West Point, was West Point even on that radar at that time? Were you aware of it or -

Percy Squire:

Oh, yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

I was aware of all the academies but I - but my primary objective had been to go to the Navy but not for reasons that I thought Navy was superior to West Point or anything like that. I had ulterior motives for wanting to be in the Baltimore area -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-which really didn't amount to a hill of beans. But the bottom line is when they came to the option and he told me that he had availability to make an appointment to West Point,

you know, I was eager and jumped at the opportunity. And having then learned the differences between the academies and having gained a better understanding, what the future opportunities would be and so forth, I could see it was actually - it was divine intervention.

[Laughter]

Interviewer:

Better deal.

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

Either way it wasn't the steel mill.

Percy Squire:

No, that's right, that's right.

Interviewer:

Okay. Very interesting.

Percy Squire:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

In your public school, high school experience, what was the diversity makeup or the racial makeup of the high school you attended?

Percy Squire:

The high school I attended was in a blue collar neighborhood on the east side of Youngstown, Ohio, and while I didn't realize it until I got to West Point, I really didn't know any white people until I got here because the people that I went to school with were Neapolitan Italians, Napals, Polish, Hungarian - they were ethnic, extremely ethnic, because the steel mills were populated primarily by Eastern and Southern Europeans, Spanish and blacks, and Northern Europeans - you know, Germans, English, Anglo-Saxons - really didn't like on our side of town.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And, you know, I'm being somewhat facetious when I say I didn't know white people, but the white people that I knew growing up in Youngstown, Ohio were very ethnic.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

First generation Americans for - to a large extent. Many of my friends when I was in grade school and I would go to their homes in the evenings, their parents didn't speak English, you know? They were Romanian, Bulgarian, Italian, and their parents - their dads were steel workers.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So we lived in blue collar, very Balkanized neighborhoods. There were Romanian neighborhoods, there were Polish neighborhoods. It was a very Balkanized type of circumstance and it was formulated that way through the intentional actions of the steel industry owners because they didn't want the labor force to unionize.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

So what they did was initially when they first opened those mills they imported workers from Eastern and Southern Europe and lived in company housing much in the nature of army barracks and they didn't permit those guys to bring their families with them. It was only after serious labor eruptions where they had strikes that became very violent, in order

to try to quell the behavior of the workers they started permitting them to bring their families in. But one of their initial policies in relation to the labor unrest in Youngstown was because they viewed these Southern and Eastern Europeans as being anarchists. You gotta remember this was the period immediately following World War I and there was a great deal of unionization going on at that time in the '20s, in 1925 and 1926. So the reaction of the steel mill owners was to find a more manageable labor force and that's when they went south and recruited black workers. They got these guys out of - like my grandfather - from behind mules in the cotton fields and brought them up to the steel mills because they couldn't join labor unions. And then what they did with their workforce that they had that was existing, they brought their families over because they thought that would help moderate the behavior of these anarchists who were joining labor unions if they brought their wives and children over, but they put them in company housing -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-that the companies owned and they organized those neighborhoods by ethnicity, and so when you look at Pittsburg and Cleveland and Youngstown, Ohio and you see all these ethnic neighborhoods and people think, "Well, people just tend to gravitate toward their own," that's not true at all. The labor leaders, the steel mill owners, put those workers into segregated and Balkanized neighborhoods to keep them from organizing.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And blacks couldn't join the unions at all, so I grew up in an area where, you know, you got Russian kids on one street, German kids, you know, Italians, and there were all these little segments around Youngstown - in Youngstown, Pittsburg, all the areas, Steubenville; all those communities out there are like that.

Interviewer:

Now were all of these mills run by the same company or -

Percy Squire:

No.

Interviewer:

-or were they different - all the different companies?

Percy Squire:

No. These mills were run by different companies. See, at the time - when the steel industry started in the Mahoning Valley where I'm from, that's only - Youngstown, Ohio is equal distance from Pittsburg and Cleveland.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And it's on the Mahoning River which leads down to the Ohio River, and there were steel mills from Wheeling, West Virginia all the way up to Lake Erie and the number-one steel-producing region in the country was Pittsburg. That's the home of US Steel.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But you had United States Steel, you had Republic Steel, you had Carnegie. My dad worked in the steel mill that was started by Andrew Carnegie and eventually that was purchased by US Steel, but there was a time - there was Youngstown Sheet and Tube, there was US Steel, there was Republic Steel, and there must have been seven or eight major companies who operated steel mills in Youngstown.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Percy Squire:

Youngstown was the third largest steel-producing area in the United States when I grew up.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Percy Squire:

It was a very vibrant, heavy manufacturing area and it was a boomtown. I didn't realize that growing up.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But it was a boomtown; it was large, full employment, dirty, polluted, [laughs] you know, but everyone had jobs, you know?

Interviewer:

Right. That's not what you're paying attention to as a teenager.

Percy Squire:

No, but I didn't - but that was the environment I grew up in.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So I grew up in a community that was not plagued with all of the social ills that these young children face today.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

Most people came from two-parent homes, most people's dads worked in the mill.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Everyone had employment and as a result there were extensive social and recreational opportunities for young people; you know, athletic leagues, the YMCAs, church activities, because the steel industry provided tremendous input to the tax base.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So there was - the towns were solvent. There was money there - and I mean we were not wealthy, we were lower middle class, we were working class, but people lived in stable homes, there was income, the public schools were good. So it was a - you know, it was a definite reflection of the American dream, you know?

Interviewer:

Stable environment.

Percy Squire:

Folks were able to raise their families, send their kids to college, and I mean that was the kind of community I grew up in, but it was very - I stress it was very Balkanized, you know?

Interviewer:

Right. What about brothers and sisters?

Percy Squire:

I have two sisters, yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay. And older or younger?

Percy Squire:

Two older sisters, yes.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now had they gone off to college before you got to that point or?

Percy Squire:

My oldest sister, who is now a physician - she's a psychiatrist at the - she's the head of medical special emphasis programs at the Dayton VA Center in Dayton, Ohio - she was valedictorian of our high school that I went to. My younger sister who is - was born April 5, 1947 - today's her birthday -

Interviewer:

Happy Birthday.

Percy Squire:

-passed away two years ago.

Interviewer:

Oh, okay.

Percy Squire:

But she wasn't valedictorian but she was an honor student, majorette. So my sisters had done sufficiently well both in primary and secondary school that when I came through the teachers knew our family and so I got a lot of grades and so forth simply 'cause of who I was related to. [Laughs] So I was very - you know, it's a phenomenon that goes on. You know, you go into class the first day of school and the teacher goes, 'Oh, I know your sister. You must be a good student.' And I'm like, okay. [Laughs] If you say so, you know?

Interviewer:

Thank you very much.

Percy Squire:

I mean I'm just being very blunt.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

That was - so I benefitted tremendously -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

-from the path that my sisters had blazed. And I, you know, may - I'm - I always grew up believing girls are smarter than boys and, you know, that girls were more responsible because my oldest sister was a tremendous role model for me. Five years older than me but, you know, she - I didn't have an older brother. My older sisters taught me a lot and to this day I revere her.

Interviewer:

Well that makes good sense. Now you mentioned until you got West Point and you said - you know, you were being slightly sarcastic, but until you got to West Point you had not lived in and interacted with a lot of Anglo-Saxon-

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

-white folks. Was that something you thought about before you got here -

Percy Squire:

No.

Interviewer:

-or was it only in hindsight that you thought about it?

Percy Squire:

It was only in hindsight because when I came here the cultural difference was very patent. There was a much greater - there was a much greater I guess I would characterize as similarity socially in what we did with the kids that I went to high school with than what I experienced at West Point, and what I mean by that is the social activities and so forth, despite the fact that we lived in - on segregated blocks, well high school dances and the

like were always very integrated and those kids were extremely - you know, they did all the same dances that the black kids did and so forth.

So what I meant was there was a closeness socially there that culturally there wasn't as much of a divide as what I experienced when I came here.

Interviewer:

When you got here.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, because they were accustomed to interacting with blacks whereas when I came here a lot of people were not accustomed at all to interacting with blacks. I remember one of the first - I don't want to get vulgar here - but I remember - you know, I played football in high school, I showered every night, you know, with Puerto Rican guys, Italian guys, Hungarian guys, and everybody took a shower. It wasn't till I came to West Point and I went in the shower people were staring at my privates, you know, and I'm thinking what's wrong with these guys, you know? Well they had never seen black people and they had heard these rumors, and I was like - you know, I had never been confronted -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-with some of the myths that -

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

-were prevalent among these fellas who had never been around black people before.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

And, you know, I recall that very distinctly 'cause the white guys that I grew up with in Youngstown were - you know, when we were in the shower they didn't go around looking at your penis.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

You know, where the guys up here did. I'm not trying to be vulgar -

Interviewer:

No, no, no.

Percy Squire:

I'm just telling you the truth, you know?

Interviewer:

I understand. Now we were looking at some pictures off camera before the - before we started and I noticed - it's not unusual in the early '70s - by the time you get to your Firstie Year, you're the only African American in the company, and I know there's about seven or eight of you in the class of '72 that graduated.

Percy Squire:

Right, right.

Interviewer:

Do you remember how many started with the class in terms of African-Americans at that point or not?

Percy Squire:

I think there were nine.

Interviewer:

Yeah, so a few more.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, a couple more.

Interviewer:

But either way thatâ€™s very few and far between.

Percy Squire:

We had a - Lenwood Robinson I think had been turned back.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And we had one extremely outstanding athlete, a guy by the name of Delbert Littlejohn. He came here from the prep school.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

He was a seven-foot high jumper, which in 1968 was like Olympic - I mean, you know, if somebody could high jump seven feet - but Delbert I think left during Beast, and the thing I always remember about Delbert Littlejohn, I was going by his table - it was on steak night - and Delbert - this was during the era of, you know, the fourth-class position of attention at the table and, you know, we didnâ€™t eat the square meal but you had to order arms before you could chew and all that kind of good stuff and your bite size had to be half the size of your thumbnail was what they told you.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And I can always remember Littlejohn, I guess he had made up his mind that he was leaving and he took this big, huge piece of steak and just stuck it in his mouth, and the upperclassmen were hovered around him trying to get him to spit it out, [laughs] and he just sat there and chewed his food. But he was a - he was just a superb athlete.

Interviewer:

So once you decide youâ€™re gonna leave you might as well enjoy your meal.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, and heâ€™s gonna eat a steak, you know, so he - but - so Littlejohn was about the only guy I remember that started with us that didnâ€™t finish.

Interviewer:

Okay, so -

Percy Squire:

But he was just an outstanding person.

Interviewer:

Bottom line, very small number of you -

Percy Squire:

Very small.

Interviewer:

-that came in with the class of â€™72.

Percy Squire:

Very small number, mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

During Beast Barracks, were you spread out across the whole - well, the regiment of new cadets such that -

Percy Squire:

Yeah. I think - I was in Second New Cadet Company and I was the only black in the Second New Cadet Company. My buddy, Dave Bryce, I think was in First New Cadet Company. Tony Dedmond, Joe - Joe Edwards may have been in First New Cadet Company. I think there were two in First New Cadet Company but then there was about one in each other - of the other.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Edgar Anderson I think was in Third New Cadet Company, but there was one or two blacks - there were eight New Cadet Companies at the time as I recall. And -

Interviewer:

So it's very sparse in each company.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer:

Maybe two at most.

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

So then how did it become - how did you guys start to know each other? When did that start to happen?

Percy Squire:

Well one thing that happened, most of us were athletes.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

So Dave Bryce and I were both on the 150-pound football team. Edgar Anderson was a just world-class wrestler, and I'm not exaggerating.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

Tony Dedmond ran track.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Sonny Burns and Danny Mension, I don't recall which sports they played but we came to know each other primarily because we played athletics, but then there was also I think as we got into our - not necessarily our Plebe Year but as we got into our like our sophomore year, when we went down to the Army-Navy Game there were a couple of guys who were from Philadelphia. Lenwood Robinson was from Philadelphia. There was another fella by the name of Bruce Robinson.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And Bruce is a - I saw an article about him the other day. He's a major general for the Reserve components.

Interviewer:

Yes.

Percy Squire:

But Bruce lived in Philly and they would always organize some social events- as a matter of fact, on a number of occasions we had it jointly with Navy.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And so we began to socialize.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

That's how we'd be - develop those bonds, frankly.

Interviewer:

Interesting. Now you mentioned the shower experience during Beast as kind of the -

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

-first kind of awkward exposure, perhaps.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

But what was your interaction like with your roommates in that first summer?

Percy Squire:

I had two roommates. One guy's name was Edward Rosiak and he was from West Virginia. The other guy's name was Glen Rountree and he was from Green River, Wyoming, okay? And we were about as culturally disparate as people could be, but we had a common oppressor so we tended to be very close. [Laughs] So I had a good relationship with them.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Were either of them - I'm just guessing here - looking at - you said West Virginia and Wyoming.

Percy Squire:

Right, right.

Interviewer:

Probably had not certainly shared space -

Percy Squire:

No.

Interviewer:

-or schools with black kids before.

Percy Squire:

They knew absolutely nothing about black people but they were - you know, we worked together as you had to. The only roommate that I had that I ever had any type of a racial conflict with actually came from Philadelphia. You know, the guy from Green River, Wyoming, he and I were like best buddies and the guy from West Virginia, Rosiak, quit, and that's when this fella from Philadelphia came in and he and I - it was like oil and water, you know?

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

But the guys from West Virginia and Wyoming, it was fine, you know?

Interviewer:

Interesting. And you think that has a lot to do with them as individuals and the common oppressor or?

Percy Squire:

I think it just had to do with the attitudes toward blacks that they had and, you know, when you're from Green River, Wyoming you don't think about black people.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And so it - I was more of a novelty to him, you know, whereas the guy from Philadelphia, you know, he had preconceived notions.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

You know, where we ranked respectively.

Interviewer:

In the social classes, that kind of thing.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And our views didn't agree. [Laughs]

Interviewer:

Understand.

Percy Squire:

So there was conflict there.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And - but the other - the fella from West Virginia, Ed Rosiak, he quit, but Glen Rountree was the other fella. Rountree, unfortunately, I think during our third year may have been asked to leave for academic reasons, but he and I were very good friends.

Interviewer:

What about upperclass relationships or treatment by upperclass? Do you think you got more attention as the black new cadet or the black plebe in the company versus your classmates or not?

Percy Squire:

Well, what happened is I think - as I recall, during my first - the - you know, they divided Beast into two details then, and in the first detail in Beast my company commander was a guy by the name of Fritz Lash, and Mr. Lash was just sort of, you know, very focused and I didn't get much - which I would say individual attention. For some reason during the second Beast, my Beast commander was a guy by the name of Kelly. I don't remember Kelly's first name. But almost one of the first things he - we were having a clothing formation one night. We thought we were going to dinner and there was a clothing formation. It was during Beast. You know - I don't know if you guys have clothing formations.

Interviewer:

We called them uniform drills, I think. The same kind of thing.

Percy Squire:

All right. Well you run back in and change and come back out.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And for some reason -

Interviewer:

Great fun.

Percy Squire:

We were going through this clothing formation and the company commander came up to me and said, "How are you?" And I said, "I'm fine." He said, "Is anybody mistreating you?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "Well, I just want to make sure 'cause you're the only colored boy in the company," and I just didn't say anything, you know? And my experience during Beast wasn't any more remarkable than that. I had, again, a couple of - I never had anybody do anything to me that I attributed to racism. Most of the comments that were made to me concerning race were things that reflected their expectations of me.

You know, that - you know, they wanted me to do certain athletic things or they had an

expectation. I had the very unfortunate experience of being the first person in my class to get sluggish, and that came about because of a boneheaded skit we put on out at Lake Frederick after the Plebe Hike.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And it was suited for a locker room, and unfortunately a couple of the chaplain's wives were in the audience, and so when we got back from the Plebe Hike I was - you know, I was summoned to the first division to meet with the brigade adjutant I think it was at that time because I was gonna get a eight-and-eight or something like that, but it made me a hero in the company.

Interviewer:

[Laughs]

Percy Squire:

I'm telling you, it did. And somehow the company commander intervened. I didn't get the slug; I got a reprimand.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

But it - among the upperclassmen in the company -

Interviewer:

You were kind of the -

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

-hero of the group, huh?

Percy Squire:

They liked - you know, they - 'cause they knew what the skit was gonna be about and nobody said to me you may be in mixed company and with some of these - you know, some of this dialogue may not be appropriate.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

They were egging me on to do it, which I did.

Interviewer:

So they probably realized it was better you than them and -

Percy Squire:

Well, then when we got out - I don't think they knew the chaplain's wives were gonna be in the audience either.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Percy Squire:

And so, you know! [Laughter]

Interviewer:

Oops.

Percy Squire:

But as a result it kind of catapulted my standing among the upperclassmen.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. You know -

Interviewer:

Probably makes you a little higher profile, too.

Percy Squire:

Well, you know, they say stuff like - I'm just repeating what they say - you know, Squire's dragged the ground and all that kind of - you know what I mean? It was because -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, you know, because of the fact that I had said some of these things.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But it was supposed to be a skit, it was supposed to be funny.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

You know, we used to do skits every week. I don't know if they still do that.

Interviewer:

I don't think so.

Percy Squire:

If you wanted the fallout at your table, the plebes put on a skit, and if it was funny the table commandant would let you fall out.

Interviewer:

Okay, makes sense.

Percy Squire:

If it wasn't funny, you know!

Interviewer:

So fallout - describe fallout for people who might not have been in the corps at that point.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. At that point, you had to eat in the fourth class position of attention. You had to order arms before chewing, you could only take a bite half your thumbnail size.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

If for some reason the table commandant wanted to let you relax and eat they would tell you, "eat ease" or "fall out."

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

If we beat Navy they would let the plebes fall out until Christmas, things like that.

Interviewer:

So you go to - a little better lifestyle.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. You would be able to actually eat a meal rather than passing out all this delicious food every evening, which you had to do customarily.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So, you know, there was a ritual then where once a week plebes would put on skits like right there next to your table -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-in the mess hall and if the skit was funny the table commandant would let you fall out. So we were always creating ways to come up with something, you know, interesting and

humorous that the upperclassmen would like.

Interviewer:

We should go back to that. [Laughs]

Percy Squire:

Yeah. And so we would do that, and so it was the same with this skit out there at Lake Frederick. The upperclassmen knew 'cause each new cadet company put a skit on. There were eight skits.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And they knew what Second Company was going to do and they knew what I was gonna say and they had all approved it. Okay. So when we got up there they didn't know the chaplain's wives were gonna be in the audience. [Laughs] And so then -

Interviewer:

Important detail.

Percy Squire:

-it was like, well who told him to do that? [Laughs] You know, everybody got amnesia. Yeah.

Interviewer:

I understand. I see exactly where that's going.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. So that's what happened, but it did - you know, ironically it enhanced my status in the company.

Interviewer:

All right.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. So -

Interviewer:

That's not the worst way to go, I guess.

Percy Squire:

No, it really wasn't.

Interviewer:

No.

Percy Squire:

It wasn't that bad, actually, you know?

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

But we did say - I mean there was inappropriate language and so forth, you know?

Interviewer:

It's at least a funny story.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, it was funny.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So you said earlier that you thought - or you're sure that you got a great education in the public school system of that time. So once you get past the skits and Beast Barracks and you start getting into the classrooms, how did you find the academic load at West Point compared to what you were used to in high school?

Percy Squire:

Well, in high school I had an outstanding academic record. At West Point I didn't apply myself. I was more concerned with shining my breastplate and my shoes than I was in studying, and the reason I think for that was because I could get away with it. They taught the test. You know, my company, G-1 - people referred to it humorously as Goat 1 - there

was no stigma to having a low academic order of merit. What was more important was the creases in your pants and your military skills. In the G-1 the whole focus was on what kind of cadet you were, and what I meant by that was the military side of things was given a lot more emphasis in my company than the academic side of things. So I never had any problems with academics, yeah, but I didn't apply myself very much either.

Interviewer:

Now did you stay in company G-1 for all four years? Was that -

Percy Squire:

All four years, until my senior year when I was on, you know, staff.

Interviewer:

On staff, sure. So G-1 had a reputation as worry about the military stuff, do whatever you need to do to get by in grades and you'll be fine.

Percy Squire:

That was basically their attitude.

Interviewer:

Interesting. [Laughs]

Percy Squire:

That was basically the attitude. You know, you keep your room squared away, you keep your uniform looking straight, your appearance straight, you know? That - there was a great deal of emphasis placed on, you know, military skills.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

How did the instructors interact with you? I mean I imagine if you're one of eight African Americans in the whole class you probably - by yourself in the section room a lot of times - how did that go for you in the classroom sense with the instructors?

Percy Squire:

All of the instructors that I encountered were Vietnam veterans. They had extensive experience in dealing with black soldiers. Most of them were in the combat arms. So the instructors for the most part - now you gotta remember, the dearth of black cadets ended after my first year.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So the second year, when I was a Yearling, there were a lot more black cadets running around here. There were - they brought in like 50 black cadets or something like that.

Interviewer:

Yes, sir.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. So the instructors were very much in tune to the Army's need for black officers because most of them had just come back from Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

You know, most of these guys were senior captains or majors and say - there wasn't that much difference in our ages, frankly, because these guys were getting promoted to captain after like two years or something like that and they were getting promoted to major after five or six years. So a lot of these - like Bucha and those guys, they were in the class of '65. They were back up here as instructors.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

You know, so a lot of the instructors were not that much older than us when you looked. I mean fewer than 10 years.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And so there was a - I found across the board there was a significant ease among the faculty in dealing with us as individuals.

Interviewer:

I had not thought about the age thing before. That's interesting, yeah.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, well they weren't much older than us.

Interviewer:

Now you mentioned the explosion in the number of African American cadets that came in starting with the class of '73, and just looking at their graduation numbers, '73 and '74 both graduated two dozen and almost three dozen in '75.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So I can see that explosion at least as reflected in graduation numbers. Did you get a sense, you know, while you were a cadet that that was an institutional push to do that and was that something that they involved you guys in as plebes or was that just kind of going on without your awareness?

Percy Squire:

It was going on without my awareness.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

I believed, though, that there was an institutional push.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Because there was a great deal of concern that I was aware of at the lack of West Point graduates, black West Point graduates, going into the Army at that time.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

There was concern about that. It was something that I heard discussed, and so there was a recognition on my part that the admissions - you know, and I was a - even though there were only eight or nine black cadets in my company or in our class when I came in, I always believed that my admission was to some extent a function of affirmative action. I always believed that. Even though our numbers were smaller -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-I still believed that the same policies that led to the increased numbers in '73 had been operative in connection with my admission.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

So whether that was right or not I believed that, yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah. And best I can tell, the numbers in the classes ahead of you, with the exception of '71, are about the same as your class.

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

â€˜71 was very small, only three graduated.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

But I know the Academy appointed an officer starting, I believe, in the summer of â€˜69, which would explain the class of â€˜73 - well, no, â€˜73 wouldnâ€™t be quite right, but certainly it was a push, thereâ€™s no doubt about that. When did you first notice, you know, as a Yearling that, wow, thereâ€™s a whole lot more African American plebes this year than in our class?

Percy Squire:

When I was at Camp Buckner, when they came through for the Plebe Hike.

Interviewer:

Ah, when they were hiking.

Percy Squire:

Because one of the other things that had contributed to my standing in my company was I had spent a number of years in scouting before I came to West Point. I was a Cub Scout then I was in the Boy Scouts, as I indicated. The guy who put me in touch with the congressman I met when I was on the staff at our local Boy Scout camp. Well I was with a troop from the inner city in Youngstown and one of the things that we did a lot of in my Boy Scout troop was we had a drill team, so to speak. And so I knew all these cadences. So when I came to West Point, another thing that was helpful to me in terms of how I fit into my company was I knew a lot of cadences that these guys had never heard, and they liked them.

Interviewer:

[Laughs]

Percy Squire:

And they were strictly inner city, you know, little jingles we used to sing. So whenever we got into formation the platoon leader or someone would say, â€œSquire, call cadence,â€ okay, and I would say these different cadences, sound off, this, that and the other.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Well, when I was at Buckner at the end of my Plebe Year and the plebes would come through there on their Plebe Hike I was a Yearling.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But the plebes came through - I heard these cadences that I knew these were black people because, you know, they were singing, you know, Dyke and the Blazers, War. You know, I heard - when I first met Butch Ferguson he didnâ€™t know but I was standing there at Camp Buckner and I heard him calling cadence as their company came through and then I heard several other people, you know? So that was my first exposure to them.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

And I could tell right then from a cultural standpoint there was a change occurring.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

There was a change occurring.

Interviewer:

Can you think of some examples of some of these cadences?

Percy Squire:

Oh, I can remember them very well.

Interviewer:

Yeah?

Percy Squire:

I can remember them very well.

Interviewer:

You want to sing one for us?

Percy Squire:

Oh, I won't - I'm not gonna sing it, but I mean I can sing - you know, there was a song by War, you know, "Early in the morning before you eat your breakfast you got to get down." Have you ever heard that? Well they turned that into a cadence but they were saying, "Early in the morning before you eat your breakfast you gotta run around." They're talking about doing PT.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

There was another one by Dyke and the Blazers called "We Got More Soul."

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

You know?

Interviewer:

So they were taking popular songs -

Percy Squire:

They were taking popular songs.

Interviewer:

-adapting it to the military situation?

Percy Squire:

That's right.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

And I had never heard that until these black guys were coming through. None of the other eight companies when I was a cadet - the cadences that I sang were more military cadences and they didn't have that popular culture impact.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

I learned them through scouting.

Interviewer:

Got it.

Percy Squire:

But they were standard cadences, you know, "Jody's Got Your Girl and Gone" and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Okay, where these guys were actually singing War and people - and then they were adapting those cadences.

Interviewer:

So they were stepping it up a notch there.

Percy Squire:
Yes they were.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Yes.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

And I could tell there was a cultural shift occurring then.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now one of the other - actually, one other question I wanted to ask you before we go to the next thing. African American officers, how many - do you remember a lot of African American officers on the faculty while you were a cadet?

Percy Squire:

Oh, yes. I - see, you don't have as much exposure - I'm not sure who was up here when I was a plebe because, you know, when you're a plebe you keep a very low profile, at least when you're in First Regiment. And all I wanted to do was get to the academic building and then get back to my room safe, you know, without getting stopped, because at that time they had people who prowled central area, you know, and when you came across they'd stop you and check your shoes, they'd check your gig line, they checked your brass, and you could get written up.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

So when we came out of the barracks, you know, we were ready and we were doubled - you had to double time everywhere you went, and all I wanted to do was get to Thayer Hall without running into somebody who's gonna write me up, you know?

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So I wasn't as knowledgeable about who was on the faculty or anything like that. That changed in my second and third year when I actually was able to take time and gaze around and look and see what was going on.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

And at that time there were blacks on the faculty. It became increasingly more prevalent as the years went on.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

I don't have a distinct recollection of the number in my first year but I knew there were some blacks on the faculty, but I recall, you know, Fred Gordon was a Spanish professor at the time. Mel Bowden was in the social science department I think, so there were a few, but by the time I got to be a senior there were probably about 20 or 25, you know?

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

Initially there were three or four, as I recall, you know?

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

We had a major named Baugh who was actually a graduate.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

B-A-U-G-H. He taught in the military instruction department.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now I know the number of black graduates at that point was - I want to say by that point were probably still just under 100 all total by the time, you know, your class went through, so thatâ€™s -

Percy Squire:

I think it was under 50 because I think - someone told me that the guys in our class were like 52, 53, 54.

Interviewer:

Okay, so maybe the hundreds after you add in a few classes after you.

Percy Squire:

Right, yeah.

Interviewer:

Much larger, yeah. Which is interesting â€™cause if youâ€™re under 50 and then all of a sudden you have a class that has 24 two years in a row thatâ€™s a significant jump. You mentioned football already, the 150-pound football experience.

Percy Squire:

Right, mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Really want to ask you about some of your other experiences on the club side especially.

Percy Squire:

Okay.

Interviewer:

And I know that was one of the pictures we were looking at before. So tell us a little bit about the behavioral science club and kind of how that came about as an organization or what it became to you guys, what it represented to you guys.

Percy Squire:

The behavioral science club became a place where black cadets started to gravitate as a result of activities that were going on in the Academy to address issues affecting black cadets, and what I mean by that, there was a group that someone started. I donâ€™t know if it was the commandant or the superintendent or whoever. It may have been the head of the social science department. And their objective was to cause the proper assimilation of blacks into the Corps of Cadets, and that was being pursued primarily by the Contemporary Affairs Seminar for the behavioral science club, and the Contemporary Affairs Seminar as I recall was just a small group of cadets who were in the behavioral science club.

The behavioral science club was more of an umbrella organization.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And there were several subordinate elements to it, one of which was a Contemporary Affairs Seminar, and what the Contemporary Affairs Seminar did, it focused on things that were happening within and outside the Academy that were of contemporary interest.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And one of the subjects that they undertook was to look at the assimilation of blacks into the Corps of Cadets. There was a gentleman by the name of Quay Snyder who I think was in the - he was Colonel Quay Snyder and there was also a colonel by the - Roger Nye - and all of these people were looking at things that they could do to facilitate the transition of blacks into the Academy without disrupting the norms here, and what I mean - for instance, we had haircut inspections every Thursday.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And at that point, you know, the upperclassmen would tell you, "Mister, you gotta get a whitewall haircut," and we were like a whitewall haircut? I understood the concept but it was physically impossible, you know? And so they needed to come up with another way of describing what the standard was.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So there was an effort undertaken to identify a lot of what these were facially neutral policies that really had an inappropriate impact on blacks.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And that was the original focus as I recall of - that wasn't the reason the Contemporary Affairs Seminar existed but that was one of the things that the Contemporary Affairs Seminar undertook to address, and so there were things like that. There were these inherent, you know, contradictions in the way the Academy was regulating things.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Percy Squire:

And the whitewall haircut was just one that really came to me.

Interviewer:

One of the examples.

Percy Squire:

Other - the other one was like the mixers. You know, I was the hop manager my plebe year.

Interviewer:

I was gonna ask you about that 'cause I'm not familiar with that term.

Percy Squire:

I was the hop manager. Oh, no -

Interviewer:

That's one that - I think died off.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. What they had then was every company elected a person to be the company's representative with the Cadet Hostess's Office.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And they were called a hop manager.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Percy Squire:

And we would go to the Cadet Hostess's Office and they would tell you where there's gonna be a mixer this weekend or that weekend. Then you were expected to communicate that back to your company mates and so forth, so that was a - you know, you got to wear a red sash to the hops and all that kind of stuff, right, and my [laughs] - after two or three of these hops it was like I wasn't feeling these hops, okay, because they were bringing all these ladies in - you know, it was all male at that time -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-over to Cullum Hall and all these women would come in through the front door and the guys would pick and choose, and there were never any black girls.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

You know, and a lot of the southern guys up - you know, if you grabbed a white girl they didn't like it.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

You know, so that was another thing that the Contemporary Affairs Seminar undertook to address.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

Was, you know, this social - because in many respects the black cadets didn't want to go to the hops, you know, because even if the females - and to a large extent they were - they weren't the ones who really had an objection to interacting with black cadets, but a lot of these guys who grew up south of the Mason-Dixon Line did.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And so you - you know, you could be over at the hop and, you know, link up with a white woman and get flack for it when you got back to the company.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So those were some of the real, you know, challenges facing black cadets early on here.

Interviewer:

So what was the - and I was just looking at that Howitzer picture again and it certainly shows no evidence of a whitewall haircut so -

Percy Squire:

No, no. Well, that came about -

Interviewer:

Later on.

Percy Squire:

My hair for the first three years I was at West Point was just like it is now.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

But what happened is, is they began to try to formulate a haircut regulation, you know, and many companies because they couldn't get the whitewall, the black cadets were being told, well, you have to wear your hair like Percy Squire, and so a lot of the younger guys said to me, "Hey, grow some hair," you know? So I grew it out -

Interviewer:

[Laughs] Helps us out.

Percy Squire:

I'm serious. That's how that - so I grow an afro. I didn't even wear an afro until I was a Firstie.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, but that's why because they were saying to me, inappropriately - you had upperclassmen telling them you have to wear your hair like Percy Squire. Well, listen, that wasn't the standard.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So, you know, there were things going on -

Interviewer:

That's™s interesting.

Percy Squire:

You know, a lot of the guys were packing their hair down, put in stocking caps and so forth, and the upperclassmen just didn't™ know how to deal with it.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So they came up with - you know, there was a - you know, they developed a regulation. It still wasn't™ a very effective one.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But we grew longer hair because of it. That's™ why I did.

Interviewer:

That's™ kind of funny. So the Contemporary Affairs Seminar, what was the mechanism for them to - after they discussed things and figured out, hey, we need to make this recommendation, how did that get fed back into the official system, whether the commandant system or whatever?

Percy Squire:

Well there were club advisors and so forth, and we would have discussions and, you know, various things were suggested. I mean the administration knew everything we did. So even though - you know, you have an officer representative at that point for every club.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And it's™ - [laughs] it became quite clear to me everything we did was being reported back to the administration. It's™ not - it's™ - we were a cadet group but we couldn't™ do anything unless it was approved by the appropriate, you know, person in a position of wherever it was, whether it was the social science department or whether it was the administration or the commandant; all of the things that we discussed, you know, would end up, you know, with someone reacting to it, yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now which of the organizations do you - was - became kind of the de facto black student union?

Percy Squire:

It was the Contemporary Affairs Seminar.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

Contemporary Affairs Club, yeah.

Interviewer:

Now did that happen at some point because all the white cadets just stopped showing up or was that a change in the club leadership or how did that evolve?

Percy Squire:

The Contemporary Affairs Seminar at the outlet was attended by white cadets as well as black cadets who were interested in contemporary issues.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

The black cadets began to attend Contemporary Affair Seminar meetings because in order to benefit from some of the activities and academy resources, to utilize those resources you had to be part of a club structure.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

For instance, we wanted to go on trips. Well, you know, clubs took trips. So it was a way to get off post. If you went to - we went, for instance, to a psychodrama at the Marino Institute in New York. The Contemporary Affairs Seminar went down there. And the - it may have been - I said it was social sciences and now that I think about it Colonel Snyder and those guys were in what they called MP&L.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

Military, psychology and leadership.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

That's - so the Contemporary Affairs Seminar, now that I think about it, came under the auspices of the Department of Military Psychology and Leadership.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And there were officer representatives there, and by being affiliated with a club you then had access to certain academy resources. If you wanted to have an event you could get a room at the - in Thayer Hall or in Thayer Hotel.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Percy Squire:

There were places you could go to do things. If you wanted to get a bus, you know, you could do it through a club. So we began to all attend Contemporary Affairs Seminar meetings for those reasons. They were talking about issues that were of interest to us plus we wanted to participate in activities, and through Contemporary Affairs you could do that. So the white guys that were in Contemporary Affairs didn't automatically just leave it's just that there became this overwhelming number of black cadets and we were able to elect our own hierarchy, but the bottom line is the white cadets who were in Contemporary Affairs were interested in these issues and many of them remained. I was telling Ty this morning, one of the main guys who I can recall, Bill McLaughlin, ended up being the brigade adjutant and was a very senior person in the Nestle Corporation when he got out of the Army.

But Bill was always very, very active in the Contemporary Affairs Seminar as was Jay Kimmitt, you know? His brother, Bob, was here but Jay was my roommate. Jay always went to Contemporary Affairs meetings.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

So contrary to - the Contemporary Affairs Seminar could function in the manner of a black student union but it wasn't racially exclusive and the white cadets who remained in the Contemporary Affairs Seminar remained because they were interested in what the Contemporary Affairs Seminar was doing.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

So that's the way the - yeah - it evolved.

Interviewer:

The resources piece makes a lot of sense.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

You had to have some officialness -

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

-to get all the stuff.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, because see what we wanted primarily was we wanted the Academy to send buses to like Vassar or to Bloomfield or to New Paltz State or to some of these places within a 50-mile radius where there were black students.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Because those black women at those organizations were going through the same thing we were going through. Vassar was bringing in a bunch of ladies in in '67, '66 - they hadn't done that.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But all of a sudden in '70 and '71, all of a sudden there was Kendrick House and Vassar, which was where all the black girls lived. Well, we would send a bus up to Kendrick House or you would go down to Mount Holyoke or - all of these schools around here were going through the same phenomenon that was occurring at West Point.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. So we were establishing contacts with these female universities and so forth around here, and then the Army, West Point, would send a bus down there and they'd bring these girls back and sometimes we had events at the Thayer Hotel, sometimes we had events on the superyacht but, you know, we had a lot of social activities. There were a lot of dances and things like that and they were bringing these girls up because again there was - the Academy had not provided otherwise, and so we worked up through the Cadet Hostess's Office.

Interviewer:

So this was you guys coming up with the ideas but using the resourcing abilities of the club.

Percy Squire:

We had - basically, when - if you would go to the Cadet Hostess's Office and talk about, hey, why isn't this or that, they would say, "This is the way you have to do it. You have to go through a club, there has to be - because clubs have a budget, clubs have an officer representative, and you can get a bus." If you were in a club, the French club, and you wanted to go down to something in New York, you know, to the French Embassy or something -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-the French club could do that.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So the Contemporary Affairs Club began to do things that were consistent with the mandate of the Military Psychology and Leadership Department.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So Cadet Squire individual could not walk in and get a bus -

Percy Squire:

No.

Interviewer:

-but Cadet Squire, representative of the Contemporary Affairs Seminar, fill out this paperwork, hereâ€™s your bus.

Percy Squire:

You could get a bus.

Interviewer:

Makes perfect sense.

Percy Squire:

Thatâ€™s why it was done like that.

Interviewer:

So I imagine that there also has to be some momentum provided by these large classes coming right behind yours -

Percy Squire:

Definitely.

Interviewer:

-in terms of membership in these interesting - or, you know, items of interest, topics of interest to black cadets.

Percy Squire:

Well, it only took one visit to a hop to know it was whack.

Interviewer:

[Laughs]

Percy Squire:

So after that [laughs] they were coming to the Contemporary Affairs Events.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

So guys - the big impetus to people belonging to the Contemporary Affairs Seminar were social activities.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

That was the big impetus behind it. You know, you had so limited - your free time was very limited.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

You couldnâ€™t get off campus or the post, I mean.

Interviewer:

Right. Sure.

Percy Squire:

So the only outlet socially the cadets had was the Contemporary Affairs Seminar.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now weâ€™re talking very late â€™60s, early â€™70s here.

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

What kind of a connection do you think Contemporary Affairs either as a club or individual cadets saw to the larger Black Power movement, social unrest going on in the civilian world at that time?

Percy Squire:

We received a copy of the New York Times every morning. We were acutely aware of what was going on around us. You have to put into context the point in time when we came in here. In April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King was shot and killed. The nation erupted. In June, Robert Kennedy was killed.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

During our time as high school students I mean we saw the shootings, Medgar Evers - I mean you can just go down - Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squires:

Malcolm X - you - this was an explosive period in American history, so we were all very aware of what was going on in American society, plus the Vietnam War was raging at the time.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So aside - the American society was literally coming apart at the seams, you know, and so there was a strong recognition and appreciation for what was going on elsewhere, and we talked about that a lot because, you know, if you have an opportunity to go home and you went to Port Authority in your uniform, you know, you were called a Tom, you were called a sellout, you know? And so those things created a considerable amount of consternation among black cadets, you know? There was tremendous concern about being politically relevant within the context of even being in the military academy. There was still a concern about not being totally outside, you know, of what was going on among our peer group. Because at that point in the Civil Rights Movement the shift had occurred from integration to Black Power.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And the activists were young people - Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown, you know, people like that, and then the Black Panthers. All of that was something of which, you know, we were all very aware because all you had to do was go to Port Authority and those folks were in there passing out leaflets and they would challenge and confront you.

Interviewer:

Youâ€™re talking about the Port Authority bus station down in New York City.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. Everyone went through Port Authority. Anywhere you wanted to go - there was a Trailways station right here in Highland Falls and you could get - if you had a short weekend or something like that you get on a Trailways bus and it took you to Port Authority.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And from there you went to wherever else you wanted to go, and -

Interviewer:

But that was not a safe place to be in uniform is -

Percy Squire:

It got to the point where you - where people wouldn't wear their uniforms. See, at that time if you wanted to fly space available or something like that you had to wear your uniform.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Well they began to change that because people were being accosted. You know, these were - folks were very radical. This was a very intense period in American history.

Interviewer:

So how did that feeling, the animosity there among the black cadets, how was that received by white cadets or the administration here? You know, you mentioned being politically relevant.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

It doesn't always fly in the same circle as the administration's values, perhaps.

Percy Squire:

There was no monolithic reaction, okay? There were people who were in companies where there was a great understanding of some of the challenges they faced. There were other companies where guys really had a hard time. There were two guys that came here from Texas and I'm trying to think - they were twins. I can't remember those guys. Both of them left, but they were in a company where they really had a rough time, very, very rough time, and I'm sorry I can't remember their names. But they were two black guys, they were twins, I think they came in the class of '73 and they decided to leave. So it just depended. Like for instance, I was in G-1, okay? Well the company next to me was H-1, okay? H-1 had no blacks. H-1 had the reputation of being a racist company.

It just did. It was so bad there was one guy in this company - and on camera I'm not - his name was Mike Butt, he was a turnback. But Mike Butt was supposed to be so anti-black that as a prank in H-1 they bought him a subscription to Ebony Magazine, the white guys did that. So I mean there were people around the Academy who, you know, you just didn't want to - you didn't want to run into.

Interviewer:

Right.

And - but there were others who were more progressive. So it spanned the whole spectrum

-

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-in there, so like I said, there was no monolithic reaction to black cadets. Some guys were in companies were - like Edgar Anderson. Edgar Anderson was in A-3 but Edgar Anderson was like just a super-stud wrestler.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

They loved him over there, you know? So it just depended, you know, and some guys were in companies - like at that time, when I was a plebe, Gary Steele was on the football team.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Excellent. I mean he was a tremendous receiver.

Interviewer:

Yes.

Percy Squire:

Well over in that regiment, you know, the presence of Gary Steele had an impact. Rod Morgan was in A-1. You know, he was president of the rugby club; Romo, everybody called him. Same thing. So it just depended -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-where you were located. Rod Morgan was a couple years ahead of me but, you know, he provided a great deal of comfort and aid to me when I was a plebe.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

I used to go to his room and listen to music, hide out from the upperclassmen.

[Laughter]

Interviewer:

That comes up a lot in these interviews.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, it does.

Interviewer:

This sense of solidarity.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. No question.

Interviewer:

That makes sense. So in the sense of remaining politically relevant -

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

-how was it that you guys ended up involved in the Sickle Cell Concert? When was that?

That was your first year I think?

Percy Squire:

No, that was my senior year.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

I don't recall and I questioned Dave Bryce about this the other night, who's idea it was.

Interviewer:

[Laughs]

Percy Squire:

It seems like there was just a consensus that emerged from a Contemporary Affairs meetings where the guys wanted - you know, there was a great deal of emphasis being placed on sickle cell anemia and research and so forth, and somehow there was a consensus that Contemporary Affairs wanted to do something in connection with helping, you know, fight sickle cell. Somehow we came up with the idea of putting on this benefit. I don't think it was the idea of any particular individual.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

It just seems to me like it came out of one of our -

Interviewer:

Group meeting.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, 'cause we used to sit around and, you know, chew the fat and come back with different ideas.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And the idea of putting on this sickle cell benefit came out of one of those meetings, and I just don't recall specifically what the spark was for it.

Interviewer:

And if you think about it, at least as I've heard the story -

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

It's a fairly ambitious undertaking -

Percy Squire:

It was, totally.

Interviewer:

-for a bunch of cadets to sit around and say, "Hey, let's have all these headlining acts in here, in Michie Stadium for this benefit concert.

Percy Squire:

Hey, it evolved because first we started and we were failing miserably. Well then I don't know if it was the commandant or the superintendent, but first of all they appointed Major Bowden to advise us, then Major Bowden brought in Captain Frank Slaughter, and then there was an attorney from Newburgh by the name of - I think his name was Leroy Johnson. He out of nowhere volunteered to help us. Buddy Bucha got involved with us and then there was also a professor in the social science department named Carl McCarden, and Carl took me down to Harlem and we got together with - there was a booking agent down there by the name of Jimmy Booker, was a big promoter, and we were floundering. But then Major Bowden got involved and Leroy Johnson got involved and the Academy put these resources behind it and the next thing I know, you know, they fly Aretha Franklin's brother up here.

They brought him here, Cecil Franklin. I met, along with members of the Contemporary Affairs Seminar, with Cecil Franklin in Thayer Hall right upstairs. I'll never forget it. He came with a full-length fur coat, he had a Bible in one hand, a big gold cross around his neck. We were trying to get Aretha Franklin up here. We couldn't work it out with Cecil. We tried to get Marvin Gaye, you know?

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Cecil Franklin gave me Marvin Gaye's phone number. We called his house and his wife just lambasted us for - where'd we get this number from? And when I told her, she said, "Well he wouldn't appreciate me giving out his personal number." But Marvin Gaye couldn't do it. Then finally Leroy Johnson got involved and the first person that agreed to come in was Donald Byrd from Donald Byrd and the Blackbyrds.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

We then tried to get Ike and Tina Turner. We thought we had them but then Ike Turner got arrested and so that fell apart. And then Leroy came down and he lined up The Supremes and Stevie Wonder.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Percy Squire:

Leroy Johnson found those people.

Interviewer:

Now this is the attorney from Newburgh?

Percy Squire:

The attorney from Newburgh.

Interviewer:

So heâ€™s got some connections somehow that -

Percy Squire:

He knew - he came - he volunteered. I donâ€™t know where he came from, but he came over here. He worked with Major Bowden and theyâ€™re the ones that put that together. We tried but we were never able to land the acts, but Major Bowden and Leroy Johnson, and they got Donald Byrd and the Blackbyrds, they got Stevie Wonder and they got The Supremes.

Interviewer:

Now I have to imagine, weâ€™re talking about 1971, 1972 here, I think Spring of â€™72 -

Percy Squire:

This was Spring of â€™72.

Interviewer:

Pre email, pre internet, pre cell phone.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And you guys are supposed to be going to class at West Point at the same time.

Percy Squire:

Right, right.

Interviewer:

This is a huge undertaking here.

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

No offense, but I can understand why you were running into some challenges, obviously.

Percy Squire:

We definitely were running into challenges. There were a lot of professors who were very - there were a lot - TAC officers and academic Ps who were strongly opposed to this. They were very critical. I had people make very, very critical comments to me about it, very critical.

Interviewer:

Were they critical of the concept of support sickle cell research or just the amount of time that you were, in their mind, probably wasting on the effort?

Percy Squire:

They just thought it was something irrelevant to what the Academy was supposed to be doing and how we should be spending our time.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

You know, this was - you know, this came after Woodstock -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-which is right down the road.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

There were visions of 50,000 or 60,000 people, black people, coming to West Point and there was concern about that.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

That all these people were gonna come up here, and you have to remember this was a time when people were going places and there were big riots and things.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So there was concern that all these people were gonna come up here and create chaos, you know? There was a big concern all the way till the day of the concert.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And the Good Lord blessed us and we had a deluge, so we ended up with 10,000 people instead of 50. So it was - but it still made money.

Interviewer:

It was a success. That's what I was gonna say.

Percy Squire:

â€˜Cause we sold a lot of the bands' tickets.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But a lot of people didn't show up because I mean it rained like the Dickens. It was unbelievable. We had to end up re sodding Michie Field.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Percy Squire:

We had to pay \$10,000 for that out of our proceeds.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

But still had a profit.

Percy Squire:

There was a profit, very profitable.

Interviewer:

Still raised the money for your goal, for the charity goal.

Percy Squire:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Looking back at all that, what did you take away from that experience in terms of, you know, what it meant to you or what you learned from it?

Percy Squire:

What I took away from that experience, when I think back now is that while I didn't attribute I think sufficient importance to it then, we were very fortunate to have an administration at West Point during that period of time who didn't just give lip service to the idea of diversity, that the superintendent enabled a climate to exist here where there were sincere efforts made to bring us into the mainstream. And the Officer Corps was able to thrive - the Black Officer Corps - here without fear of retaliation or retribution. Because we were able to do these things and it was a military organization, and if there hadn't been support for us at the highest levels it wouldn't have happened.

Interviewer:

Wouldn't have happened, right.

Percy Squire:

It wouldn't have happened.

Interviewer:

Do you remember who the superintendent was?

Percy Squire:

It was Knowlton.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

General Knowlton. And I told Ty today, when I think back about this, he managed this. The whole thing with the Confederate monument, with the Sickle Cell Concert, with buses and so forth going - none of that wouldn't have happened if we had not had an administration who gave their imprimatur to it. It would not have happened.

Interviewer:

Right. He could very easily use his three stars to shut down anything he wanted.

Percy Squire:

And there was a perception across the Academy that he was supportive of what we were doing and these lower ranking folks, like it or not, went along with it.

Interviewer:

Okay. So they didn't have to like it but it's a military organization, they had to do it.

Percy Squire:

That's what happened.

Interviewer:

Okay. You mentioned the Confederate monument.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

I think chronologically we're out of order but I think that'll work out fine. Tell us a little bit about that one - cause I don't think that's a story that most people outside of a small group here have probably ever heard about. So if you could just tell us a little bit about the background of that.

Percy Squire:

Well it's interesting that you say chronologically we're out of order because I have been trying my best to recall in the chronology when the Confederate monument came up, and it must have come up in the - let me - '72 was an even year so the presidential election must have been in November of '72.

Interviewer:

After you graduated. Right.

Percy Squire:

Right. But President Nixon must have come up here - it must have been in the Spring of '72 or it was in the Fall of '71. I can't recall exactly.

Interviewer:

I thought it was just prior to graduation of '71, but I could be wrong about that.

Percy Squire:

No you could be - no, see, it had to be in the Fall of '71. That's what I'm - in that timeframe.

Interviewer:

All right.

Percy Squire:

Because the president came up here and then all of a sudden I know I got a directive to come to the superintendent's office, and I think at that time I was the president of the Contemporary Affairs Seminar, is my recollection. I think I had been a company commander out at Camp Buckner, but for some reason General Knowlton called me to his

office and that must - that had to be in the fall. Thatâ€™s when it was. It was in the Fall of â€™71.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And he told me about the conversation he had with the president and what was said when they were touring the Academy grounds, and he asked me for some input on what I felt. So he basically said, â€œTell me what your reaction to this is.â€ He was managing us, okay? â€Cause I donâ€™t think he was in favor of his monument.

Interviewer:

Right. Tell our viewers just a little bit about what the Presidentâ€™s either question or statement was that he was looking for input about?

Percy Squire:

It was my understanding that following the parade and so forth that had been conducted for the president, they were touring the Academy grounds, that President Nixon saw Battle Monument and he wanted to know what it was, and General Knowlton told him, â€œWell, that is a monument to the Union dead during the Civil War.â€ And he asked, â€œWell where is the monument to the Confederate side?â€ And General Knowlton said, â€œWell there is none because those individuals, you know, rebelled, that they abrogated their oath to the United States, and fittingly, thereâ€™s no monument here to them,â€ and he said the president said to him, â€œOh, thatâ€™s nonsense.â€ He said, â€œThat warâ€™s been over 150 years. The nation is reconciled. There should be a monument up here to the Confederate graduates. I want you to make it happen and Iâ€™ll come up here and dedicate it.â€

Well I think everyone realized what the political calculus was for President Nixon.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

You know, and why he wanted to come up here and make that, you know, gesture and how it was going to be received, you know, and Iâ€™m more convinced of that than ever after the recent revelation by Haldeman, who was his chief of staff or something like that, about how the war on drugs is really an attack at hippies and blacks and that was just the means that that administration was using in order to achieve that end. Well this was another one of his - you know, they called him Tricky Dick, right, and I mean this was another one of his, you know, tricks. And so -

Interviewer:

Thereâ€™s a lot of evidence there. [Laughs]

Percy Squire:

Yeah, but what Iâ€™m saying is I was, you know, 20 years old.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And the guy who really managed this situation - and Iâ€™m gonna say it again - was General Knowlton. General Knowlton knew what the reaction was gonna be.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But he said, â€œSo, I want you to, you know, come back in a few days and tell me what you think. Talk it over.â€ Well we went back -

Interviewer:

Did he say go ask your people?

Percy Squire:

He basically said - [laughs] you know, I want to get some feedback, I want to know what

you think, you know, so on and so forth. So, you know, we went back, we had a - and I mean, you know, the doors could've been blown - these guys were just livid, you know? I mean not only no, hell - I mean they were absolutely - I mean they were very - I can't express to you the outrage. And one of the reasons for that was because they saw the cynicism and what was being attempted. That was the reason for it. I think there was less reaction to the notion of a monument for the Confederate dead than there was to the fact that they saw this as a manipulation being attempted by President Nixon. People felt the President was being very unfair and that he was really creating, you know, something that was going to have long-term adverse consequences for West Point. And we were already, you know, accustomed to people saying you were a Tom or a sellout or something like that. Now they're gonna build a monument in 1972 to the Confederacy at West Point. I mean people - the black cadets were vehement in their opposition to that.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So it was the straw that broke the camel's back. There were a number of simmering grievances about the way business was being conducted here, but when this came up this was like just too much.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So that's why - what happened was the input that - what we gave back to General Knowlton was far more than he had asked for. He really wanted merely a response to how we viewed the monument and he ended up getting that manifesto -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-which had 13 or 14 separate points, because all of these things had been sort of simmering beneath the surface, but when President Nixon came up with this notion, that everything got documented and put back and given to General Knowlton.

Interviewer:

This is awkward for an instructor thinking about cadets. We ask one question, you give me 14 answers.

Percy Squire:

Correct.

Interviewer:

Right?

Percy Squire:

That's basically what happened.

Interviewer:

And that's looking at it from the superintendent's perspective.

Percy Squire:

And the way we justified that was that here is how we react to this because this is an institution that is struggling with all of these issues; you know, social events, diversity in the staff, admissions, cultural - you know, we had a situation where we were at the Army Navy game on national TV and cadets start waving Confederate flags and a fight broke out between cadets - white and black cadets because they snatched the flag down. So I'm saying - and on the official West Point album Dixie was there. I mean, you know, so there was an ingrained component of the Confederacy already at West Point that black cadets objected to.

So when you take that and then you add to it the notion that you're gonna actually memorialize - you know, and this was a time when - you know, there was a former West Point cadet who went to Columbia. He dropped out of West Point, and when they seized

the administration building at Columbia this guy's picture was all over The New York Times with a cadet jacket on with two bandoliers. I don't know if you've ever seen that photograph.

Interviewer:

I don't know that I have. I'll have to look that one up.

Percy Squire:

He was a West Point guy.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

He - you know the little jacket, the little gray jacket?

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

[Laughs] He was in the - they had his picture in the - he's standing up there with a cadet jacket on with two bandoliers, you know, of ammunition.

Interviewer:

And this was one of the student campus protests on Columbia?

Percy Squire:

Yeah. It was Columbia, it was Columbia. They took the administration building. So the point I'm making is this was a time when students were going seizing administration buildings -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-all over the country and then here we're gonna come in, you know, and put up a monument to the Confederacy, you know, as a demonstration of support for Richard Nixon? That was the reaction of the black cadets.

Interviewer:

I understand.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

I've heard rumor before that up until this point - this might've been one of the 13 points in the manifesto - in addition to Dixie on the album that it was one that the band played routinely.

Percy Squire:

The band played it all the time.

Interviewer:

At parades.

Percy Squire:

Yeah, at parades. That's what I'm saying. These were the types of things that the black cadets were -

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

Dixie was played frequently by the West Point band.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And then on the West Point official album there was Dixie.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

And, you know, those types of things - it's like the whitewall haircut.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

They were glossed over but black cadets didn't like that.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So in the approximate sense -

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

-how long do you think it took you guys to get this manifesto together?

Percy Squire:

This manifesto was put together in about three days.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Percy Squire:

Because the superintendent asked about it.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

I went back and talked and then I drafted it up, but then I had to go back and talk to the guys about it, you know, to make sure we got - because I didn't sit down and dream up those 13 points. We got input from our peers in the Contemporary Affairs Seminar

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-on where they saw problems, and then, you know, I also worked with Joe Ellis to edit it because it wasn't cast in the nature of a petition of grievances in the form of the Declaration of Independence until Ellis suggested that. It was just a writing. We had the demands, so to speak, and we articulated, you know, our frustration with the situation, but the idea to cast it in the tenor of a Declaration of Independence came from Professor Ellis who was - you know, he was a black studies professor and a Jeffersonian scholar. And he was, you know, heavily, you know, into, you know, Jefferson, Madison, the Declaration of Independence.

Interviewer:

What school was he at?

Percy Squire:

West Point.

Interviewer:

He was here.

Percy Squire:

He was - taught black studies here.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

He was a professor of mine.

Interviewer:

Civilian or military?

Percy Squire:

He was military.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

He was an MP. He was one of these guys who got drafted and instead of sending him to Vietnam they sent him into West Point because of his credentials.

Interviewer:

Preexisting credentials to getting drafted.

Percy Squire:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Gotcha. Okay.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. He was a scholar. Heâ€™s a writer, heâ€™s a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, and he was, you know, drafted into the Army. He didnâ€™t go to Canada. They put him in a military police tour and then they assigned him up here. He taught black - he was the first black history professor.

Interviewer:

Makes sense now.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. Joe Ellis.

Interviewer:

So we mentioned this earlier off camera again, but Cadet Squire reports back to the superintendentâ€™s office -

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

Sir, here you go. Whatâ€™s the 60 seconds after that look like?

Percy Squire:

Well, what was interesting was itâ€™s likeâ€¦ Obviously, General Knowlton knew what was going on because when I went back up to his office it was like, oh, well I heard there was, you know, a negative reaction to this. And you see, because there was something else going on that has been overlooked in the narrative historically that shouldnâ€™t be overlooked. I think there was more credit given to us than was actually warranted because the Association of Graduates was strongly opposed to this.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Art Hester is the one that told me that because Art Hester had something to do with the Association of Graduates, and he told me -

Interviewer:

He was a board member at the time.

Percy Squire:

And he told me that there were people - I think it was Harold K. Johnson - there were some very senior general officers who were like absolutely against this.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So when you had the AO - and it was - was it the AO? It was some entity. It was like - I think it was the AOG.

Interviewer:

Yes, sir.

Percy Squire:

But when you had these very prominent general officers and the AOG expressing this dissent and then you combine that with all the black cadets and all the black officers, that together created - you know, there was a synergy there. And I think by the time we went back to General Knowlton, General Knowlton already had basically put the kibosh on this.

But then we put the icing on the cake because he really didn't want to take that document from me, you know?

Interviewer:

[Laughs]

Percy Squire:

And I was sort of like - I didn't force it on him but there was like, "Well, sir. I'd really like for you to read this," type of thing.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And it was, "Okay, okay, I'll -" but he really was like, "Oh, I got - how you doing? It was nice, see you later," you know? And I was like, "Well, sir, I got this document." So I think he knew it was coming.

Interviewer:

Now you mentioned -

Percy Squire:

We had - there were definite spies in the organization. [Laughs]

Interviewer:

Right. You said that earlier.

Percy Squire:

That - yeah, I mean so we knew that.

Interviewer:

There was nothing going on here he didn't know.

Percy Squire:

There was nothing going on that he didn't know about it.

Interviewer:

Right. And I doubt that's changed. But you mentioned - and I didn't think to ask this earlier - but you mentioned the officers.

Percy Squire:

Yes.

Interviewer:

So you've got a number of black cadets who signed this -

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

You know, risky, yes. Probably not fatal, but for a major or a captain -

Percy Squire:

That's right.

Interviewer:

-to sign this document and present it to a lieutenant general -

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

-that's a different level of risk for them.

Percy Squire:

Well when I first gave it back to [laughs] General Knowlton a few days later General Walker, the commandant, called me to his office, and he said - I guess they thought I was an idiot, okay? So he goes, "Who wrote that?" [Laughs] Okay. "Was it Bowden?" You know, I said, "No, sir. I wrote that." I did write it.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

Joe Ellis edited it but I wrote it, and it was like, "Who wrote that document up? Was it Bowden?" He was talking about Major Bowden. [Laughs] I said, "No, sir." So he

grilled me because he was really of the view that one of the black officers had put us up to doing this and that wasn't - it was our idea. It wasn't my idea. It was the idea of the black cadets.

Interviewer:

Collective.

Percy Squire:

And we brought the officers into it, but we had some officers up here who were very committed, and I don't think they cared. I think they were - Art Hester was one of them.

Interviewer:

Yes.

Percy Squire:

I don't think Captain Hester cared. And we had Floyd McAfee; I don't think he cared. And we had Mel Pender. Do you know who that is?

Interviewer:

I know the name.

Percy Squire:

I mean I don't mean to question you.

Interviewer:

No, no, no, that's fine.

Percy Squire:

Mel Pender [laughs] - there were - Mel Pender was militant, you know? And we had Carl McCarden, we had Howard Shegog, Jesse Moss, Joe Jenkins; these guys were, you know, very strong in terms of taking a stand against this monument being built here. So they didn't - and they also were very - oh, Cornell McCullom. Colonel McCullom was a graduate of West Point. Fred Gordon, you know? And I mean these guys were, you know, the harder right instead of the easier wrong. That's where they were coming down. They viewed this as the harder right.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

And so I don't think it was necessarily going to conduce toward their advancement as military officers but they felt that it was the right thing to do and they stood - because you don't get Army officers to sign.

Interviewer:

Not easily. [Laughs]

Percy Squire:

No. And it was only because of the very unique circumstances that were present here that they were willing to take that step. And I can recall being up in Stony Lonesome in Major Shegog's house talking to them, okay? They were all up there, and the only officer that played a game with us was Captain Fred Peters. He just - when the signing occurred somehow he wasn't available, you know?

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

And I think I have 22 officers on the staff at that time, 21 signed it.

Interviewer:

That's pretty consistent with what I've heard from some other interviews also so -

Percy Squire:

Yeah, Captain Peters - and I mean I was okay with Captain Peters but Captain Peters, you know, he was playing the game.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

I think he ended up making general soâ€¦

[Laughter]

Interviewer:

Now, most importantly to bring this story kind of full circle, whereâ€™s the Confederate monument at West Point?

Percy Squire:

Itâ€™s not here, is it?

Interviewer:

Exactly. [Laughs]

Percy Squire:

Right. Lee Hall. Thatâ€™sâ€¦ [Laughs]

Interviewer:

Well, yeah. Weâ€™ve had that conversation today too so -

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

But to your point -

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

-whether it was you guys, whether it was the Association of Graduates, whether it was both, the resolution of the issue was thereâ€™s still no Confederate monument at West Point.

Percy Squire:

Right, right. But the thing I keep trying to emphasize is that we had a very definite role in it, but it wasnâ€™t some unilateral action.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

Percy Squire:

The black officers were very important and Dave and I were the, you know, formal leaders but the black cadets as a group were unanimous.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And I mean strident in their opposition of this.

Interviewer:

Now Dave Bryce, your classmate, was the vice president and you were the president of the club orâ€™?

Percy Squire:

No. Dave was president of the behavioral science club which was the umbrella organization.

Interviewer:

Okay, the umbrella, and you were president of -

Percy Squire:

I was president of the Contemporary Affairs Seminar.

Interviewer:

Itâ€™s a one-two punch there.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

Percy Squire:

Right, mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

So I think, you know, those are two great examples of the - I'm looking for your words again - the political relevance of the club and of the members of the club at that time. How did you feel that your involvement in those - in that organization and those activities influenced the rest of your cadet standing? You know, obviously you were a battalion commander -

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

-as a Firstie, so you're doing well in the things that G-1 cared about. [Laughs]

Percy Squire:

Right.

Interviewer:

So what were some of the other influences of your involvement in those activities on your other aspects of cadet life?

Percy Squire:

Well, My experience here as a cadet was I think typical. I had the same, you know, complaints about, you know, our existence and some of the hardships and the like, but in my lettered company and among my classmates and so forth I don't think it affected me in any adverse manner at all. It was just something that people knew that I was involved in and I never had anyone come up to me and say, "Well, you know, we think you're a knucklehead or you're a jerk or you shouldn't do this." This was just something that we - we were all involved in.

And I think there was a recognition at the Academy at that time that a change was occurring.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

That there was, you know, a new - there was a new dimension to the Academy, that black cadets were here not just in a token fashion.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But that black cadets were here permanently and that their numbers were going to increase, and I think the cadets who recognized that part of the education they needed to obtain here required them to be able to deal with black people, you know? Recognize that this was just the nature of where we stand at this point in history. There were certainly, I'm sure, anecdotal - there were anecdotal differences from what I'm saying to you, but for the most part it was accepted.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

That was my sense.

Interviewer: ^Okay.

Percy Squire: ^I didn't have much of a - you know, I never personally had any confrontations. But again, you know, I was a senior, I was a battalion commander.

Interviewer: ^Right.

Percy Squire: ^And like my regimental commander was Mike Deegan. Well, I'd known him since we were - Bob Van Antwerp was the brigade commander. They were buddies of mine.

Interviewer: ^Yeah.

Percy Squire: ^I got along well with those guys, you know? And so what I'm saying is it was accepted, you know, and I think we had the benefit that you don't have in civilian organizations that we were in a social and political setting with the Contemporary Affairs

Seminar but both Dave and I were captains, and so that gave us a certain stature within the institution.

Interviewer: ^The cadet rank.

Percy Squire: ^Within the cadet rank.

Interviewer: ^Boosting your standing.

Percy Squire: ^Right.

Interviewer: ^Okay.

Percy Squire: ^It really did. So what I'm saying is our activities in the Contemporary Affairs Seminar and the behavioral science club basically were given more legitimacy because of the fact we were captains in the Corps. So that meant that, well, you know, people were more willing to accept. If it - I'm just gonna say this - I think if I had been a cadet sergeant, okay, who didn't keep his shoes signed, people would've felt like these are just some guys trying to get attention or something like that.

Interviewer: ^Knuckleheads.

Percy Squire: ^Right. But by virtue of us having been able to achieve mainstream positions within the institutional structure, it gave more legitimacy to what we were doing in the social and political context. That was my

Interviewer: ^That's a great point, 'cause I was gonna ask - you know, looking at some of those other Howitzer photos, you know, of the seven or eight of you in your class, you know, what kind of rank did the other guys in your class achieve? You mentioned Dave was also a cadet captain, but what - do you remember -

Percy Squire:

Edgar Anderson was a cadet captain. Joe Edwards was in the - he was on brigade staff or regimental staff. Tony Dedmond - I don't recall how much rank Tony achieved because Tony was like the number one guy on the track team.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And so I don't think Tony was looking at things from the standpoint of trying to be a cadet captain and that type of thing, but he was held in very high regard by his contemporaries because he was the guy on the track team. You know, he ran the dashes, you know, he was very 2200 - and he was -

Interviewer:

I heard he was pretty fast. [Laughs]

Percy Squire:

Oh, he was excellent. Tony was very fast.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

Tony was very fast. So as a result, what I'm saying is that those of us that, you know, were in the class of '72 still had good relationships with our classmates.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And they didn't view what we were doing, you know, negatively. And the sickle cell thing I thought - most people thought that was really, you know, something that was positive.

Interviewer:

It was probably one of the better concerts that year, huh? [Laughs]

Percy Squire:

Yeah, they were. [Laughs] You had the -

Interviewer:

Despite the rain.

Percy Squire:

When Stevie Wonder showed up here the night before the Sickle Cell Concert, he was at the Thayer Hotel, and Stevie Wonder is the type of guy - it was like, oh wow, we got West Point black people and this and that. He sat down at the piano, he put on a mini concert the night before the concert.

Interviewer:

[Laughs]

Percy Squire:

I mean that's how this thing was, and they stuck around after the concert. So I'm saying it was an event.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Sounds like it.

Percy Squire:

You know, it was the whole weekend. And I mean you had Mary Wilson from The Supremes, Stevie - and Stevie Wonder just was like - I mean he just - they should've given him a uniform, I mean he was like - you know, I mean really. You couldn't have asked for a better guy. I mean he wasn't one of these guys that went out there on the stage and played for 20 minutes and - you know?

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

I mean he played for like an hour, I mean it was unbelievable.

Interviewer:

Yeah. He didn't fly in 20 minutes before -

Percy Squire:

No.

Interviewer:

-and fly out right after, yeah.

Percy Squire:

He was - I mean he just did a tremendous job 'cause he was into it.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

You know, he -

Interviewer:

I'd be hard-pressed to think of any concerts that have happened in Michie Stadium since then.

Percy Squire:

No. He liked it. I mean he enjoyed what he was doing, he believed in it. Same thing with The Supremes.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

You know, they were - so this - I think a lot of cadets thought it was something - you know, very worthwhile.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Sir, we've covered a lot of ground.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And we haven't even got you to graduation yet.

Percy Squire:

Oh.

Interviewer:

Which is fine. Weâ€™re gonna do another interview with you sometime down the road, I hope.

Percy Squires:

No sweat.

Interviewer:

You know, weâ€™ll get you.

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Maybe Iâ€™ll come to Columbus, who knows.

Percy Squire:

No sweat.

Interviewer:

But one of the things I do want to ask you, kind of just to wrap up this segment of it is at the end of - or whenever you guys learned your branch assignments there at the - in your Firstie year, was Infantry your choice or was Infantry what was available?

Percy Squire:

Infantry was my choice.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

I think it was all that was available anyway though, but I had always planned to go in the Infantry.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Percy Squire:

But almost all of us went down to Fort Campbell. If you look at what happened in â€™72 and â€™73 -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

We almost all went to Fort Campbell. I went there, Edgar Anderson went there, Dave Bryce went there, and then when you got into the class of â€™73, you know, Lenwood Robinson, David - about 15 guys. Everybody went to Fort Campbell, so they all went Infantry.

Interviewer:

Interesting, interesting.

Percy Squire:

And we all went because everyone else was going there.

Interviewer:

That makes sense.

Percy Squire:

We knew, yeah.

Interviewer:

Makes sense. Solidarity, shrink the numbers down.

Percy Squire:

We were close.

Interviewer:

It sounds like it. I mean you guys -

Percy Squire:

Yeah. No, we were very close.

Interviewer:

-definitely accomplished a lot as a group. Looking back at it, what do you think those four years here at West Point meant to you at the time and has your answer changed over the

years maybe in terms of what West Point meant to you?

Percy Squire:

It really means more to me now perhaps than it did then only because I have the benefit of age and experience and have a broader context within which to compare my experience here with what wouldâ€™ve been my experience perhaps had I gone elsewhere.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

So my view at the time was that I was rather uncertain about where I was headed career-wise when I left. I still wasnâ€™t totally sure about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to spend my time, how I wanted to try to - what direction I wanted my career to go.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

Now I think had I the opportunity to relive some of the things I did earlier I wouldâ€™ve made much different choices. For instance, I wouldnâ€™t have gone to Fort Campbell, you know, right off the bat. I wouldâ€™ve probably gone overseas because it took me seven or eight years to - for the light bulb to come on, and it really came on when I got into a setting where I could see how everything came together in the Infantry unit. At Fort Campbell, you know, they were just reconstituting the 101st when I got there, they had brought back one brigade from Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

The 173rd they changed that into the Third Brigade of the 101st, then they recruited the other two brigades from the ground up using one station unit training, you know? They put the guys through AIT right there in those TO on the units, and so it was very boring and dissatisfying to me because I was basically in a basic training unit. They were trying to develop the way they use those helicopters that they had brought back from Vietnam. Thatâ€™s when they first started the Air Mobile School there.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

And all that we ever did was we had gotten small unit tactics, squad and platoon size, and it was very boring to me. Now when I got to Germany and I began to participate in Corps-level exercises and I could see the way task organization worked, we were bringing in units - you know, you have a forward observer show up at your talk. You would have tanks cross attach to you - I began to see how this all worked together.

Interviewer:

Bigger picture.

Percy Squire:

I saw the big picture. Well Iâ€™d been in the Army six years by then and Iâ€™d already made so many mistakes it was too late [laughs] to salvage my - but because I was totally bored of this - and Iâ€™m gonna just tell you - because just going out every day doing, you know, fire and maneuver with the Infantry squad gets old.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But when youâ€™re in a place like Europe where youâ€™re in the motor pool and thereâ€™s something tangible to do and then youâ€™re going on alerts and youâ€™re going to sector and, you know, these - and youâ€™re participating in Reforger -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-things like that and you see how all this - you know, it really gave me a much greater appreciation for what I was doing, and I enjoyed it.

Interviewer:

Thatâ€™s where the action was at the time.

Percy Squire:

Thatâ€™s where the - and same thing in Korea.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

But when I was - and the other thing is I found that when youâ€™re in a stateside unit you focus too much time on wanting to be a civilian, you know? The point Iâ€™m making is you canâ€™t wait for the flag to go down â€˜cause you want to go to the club in Clarksville.

Okay, when youâ€™re in Germany or Korea thatâ€™s not what youâ€™re concerned - I wasnâ€™t trying on the weekends to run to Nashville or run to Memphis so I could hang out and party.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

You know? And that was a distraction from what I shouldâ€™ve been doing as an Army officer. I shouldâ€™ve been spending my evenings and my weekends trying to improve my unit.

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

I was trying to make up for lost time having been a cadet for four years.

Interviewer:

Four years of captivity?

Yeah. And what Iâ€™m saying is so I squandered, you know, what I think wouldâ€™ve been a much more enriching experience had I made a different selection. I did - being in the Infantry was where I wanted to be, but I had a much more positive experience when I was in the Infantry in Korea with Second Infantry Division playing a team spirit and that type of thing or when I was in Third Infantry Division playing a Reforger, you know, than I did being down at Fort Campbell, you know, doing X, Y, and Z days where on X days we went to the field and on Y days your guys went to school and all that kind of stuff and appointments. You know, it - I found that to be a very, very boring experience, you know? But I understand why they were doing that, because they were reconstituting the division then, but I didnâ€™t have that perspective as a young person.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Percy Squire:

You know? I just saw the fact that - I didnâ€™t even feel like I needed to go to work on any given day because all they were gonna do was clean their gas masks and the trenching tool. That was it, you know? Whereas when youâ€™re in Germany I mean, you know, hey, weâ€™re breaking tracks and, you know, weâ€™re - we had a lot of work to do. There was a lot that really needed to be done. You know, we were road marching this sector, we were putting together battle books. I mean there was a - it was more obvious -

Interviewer:

Right.

Percy Squire:

-that - what my function was and I felt engaged.

Interviewer:

Makes sense.

Percy Squire:

And so I should - in retrospect, had I done that initially I think I wouldâ€™ve had a different experience in the Army, you know?

Interviewer:

It makes sense.

Percy Squire:

Yeah. Soâ€¦

Interviewer:

Well, sir, thank you very much for -

Percy Squire:

Thank you.

Interviewer:

-the couple hours weâ€™ve spent and I look forward to talking with you some more and getting some more insights from your Army side -

Percy Squire:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

-and eventual civilian career. Thank you very much.

Percy Squire:

Thank you. Youâ€™re welcome.