

Interviewer:

Okay, good afternoon, sir. This is the first of July. We're here in Kansas City, Overland Park, Kansas, with * {:.person} COLonel (Retired) Art Hester, from the class of '65. Sir, thank you very much for coming in today, and if I could just have you state and spell your name for the transcript, that would be great.

COL A. Hester:

My name is Arthur Hester. That's spelled A-R-T-H-U-R H-E-S-T-E-R.

Interviewer:

Okay, sir. And we're going to talk primarily about your experiences as a Cadet and in the Army, so to start off, why don't you tell us a little bit about your background growing up, before you got to West Point as a Cadet?

COL A. Hester:

Okay. I grew up on the West Side of Chicago, went to elementary and primary school there. I went to Marshall High School, which is a famous school on the West Side of Chicago. Did pretty well in high school, and just by happenstance, as it turns out, I ended up at West Point. Now, it wasn't one of those things that I deliberately tried to do, but that's the way it worked out. I was very much interested in going to the Air Force Academy, but when I took the entrance exams, I found out that I had - well, my visual acuity was not 20/20, and I had flat feet, so I was disqualified. But, you know.

Interviewer:

Right. And at that point, this would've been 1961?

COL A. Hester:

I graduated from high school in 1960, and after I was disqualified from the Air Force Academy, my Congressman told me that, "Why didn't you apply to go to West Point?" and I said, "Well, I never thought about it. I never realized that you could apply to both at the same time." He said, "Well, you can, and so if you're still interested next year, apply and we'll see how it works out," and that's what I did.

Interviewer:

Okay. So this would've been pretty early in the history of the Air Force Academy as well.

COL A. Hester:

Absolutely. The Air Force Academy was just getting started. It was under construction. Classes had started at the Lowry Air Force Base. There was a lot of news, media information about it being going on, all that good stuff, and a lot of flying - not ads, but interest. And so I was interested in flying, so that's how it came to be.

Interviewer:

So the West Point thing was really just a byproduct of -

COL A. Hester:

Yes.

Interviewer:

The Congressman asking you, "Why didn't you apply?"

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

So what did you know about West Point before that?

COL A. Hester:

Not a lot. I mean the West Point Story had been on TV. I knew that it was a Military Academy and -

Interviewer:

That's the late '50s, right?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Some of the graduates, who they were and all that. Even then, I was kind of a history buff, so I knew a little bit about the people that'd gone there, and the Civil War, and all

that stuff. But what I was really interested in doing was getting out on my own and being my own man, going to school and all that, and I wanted to get away to go to school. I had won a couple scholarships to go to schools in Illinois, but that wasn't far enough away for me. So going to West Point was an opportunity to do all that, and as an aside, to do it without putting a financial strain on my parents.

Interviewer:

What did your parents do? What was their -

COL A. Hester:

My mom worked. She was in retail; sold a lot of ladies' fashions and things like that. My dad, he worked at a series of places. He ended up working at the airport. He ran the janitors there; he was kind of like a supervisor of the janitorial section at O'Hare.

Interviewer:

So certainly not a ton of money to send you to school somewhere.

COL A. Hester:

No, no, absolutely not. And I had two younger sisters, and they were getting ready to go to high school, so they had expenses coming up and all that. We were not well off by any means, so this was an opportunity for me to take some of that strain off my family.

Interviewer:

So what did you end up doing for that year after high school, before you went to West Point?

COL A. Hester:

I worked. As it turned out there had been a train strike, there was a train strike, in the winter of 1959, and the Post Office had a lot of people to basically unload trucks that had carried the mail. So I got a job there. When the strike was over, the supervisor asked me if I wanted to work there permanently, and I said, "Well, yeah, I'll think about it." So I took the exam. I got a job working in the Post Office, so I worked the midnight shift the latter, oh, three or four months of my high school, and that whole year that I was out. Plus I went to * {:.person} COLlege a little bit here and there in Chicago.

Interviewer: So by the time summer of 1961 rolls around and you were on your way to West Point, what did you know about West Point before you got there? Had you ever visited or any of that kind of thing?

COL A. Hester:

No, not at all. Never been anywhere out of Mississippi and the states in between it and Illinois. I mean I hadn't traveled a lot or anything like that. First time I got on an airplane was when I flew from Chicago to New York City.

Interviewer:

Okay. Did your parents go with you, or were you by yourself?

COL A. Hester:

Oh no, no. My dad dropped me at the airport, and we hugged in wait and did a lot of crying, and I was off and running.

Interviewer:

So going into it coming from Chicago, what was your perspective or what were your thoughts on going to West Point, where obviously the student body was primarily white at that time, or was that something you even thought about?

COL A. Hester:

I didn't think much about it. The high school I went to was mostly black. Probably 80% black and maybe 10% white and 10% Hispanic, so it wasn't a big deal for me at that point. But when I got there, I realized there weren't a lot - in fact, one of my letters I pulled out - my mom kept all my letters that I wrote - and I read one last night. And I told her, "I haven't seen but one Negro here," and this was after I'd been there for about five days, and so -

Interviewer:

Right. So this was early in Beast Barracks, writing a letter home.

COL A. Hester: Exactly, yeah. And I did run across an Upperclassman there, but this was about after two or three weeks, and he didn't say anything to me, but.

Interviewer:

Right. And if he did, you probably wouldn't have liked what he said.

COL A. Hester:

No, I probably would not; probably wouldn't.

Interviewer:

Understand. So in that first summer, obviously, the focus on Beast Barracks and teaching you how to march, salute, do all that stuff, and the basic military skills. What were your thoughts initially? Did you think, "Boy, this is crazy?"

COL A. Hester:

I did. I felt that way. I thought that the Cadets were doing something that may not - I don't want to call it illegal, but probably against the rules of the place.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And I recall specifically an incident where we had a shower formation downstairs, and I saw these different uniforms, legs with different uniforms coming down. Turned out to be an Officer, and I say, "This is all going to end right now," and it didn't. So I was crestfallen. I mean just absolutely disheartening. But I was convinced that I was going to stick it out, just to show people I could. I mean I didn't want to - a lot of people were leaving, and I knew that part of the process was intended to basically run people out who didn't really have the nerve or the desire to be there.

Interviewer:

Right. Certainly an attritional model -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

At that time.

COL A. Hester:

Exactly, yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you decided I'm going to stick it out -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And show them. Now, could you detect in those Cadre that first summer, or even later in your Cadet experience as a Plebe, did you detect a difference in the way they treated you vs. the way they treated all the other obviously white Cadets, or was it pretty -

COL A. Hester:

You know, I thought long and hard about that, and to be perfectly honest with you, I don't recall a single instance where I felt that I was singled out for something for being black, at all. I mean sure, I got chewed out, and I got this, and I got that, but I think everybody else was going through the same process. It was years later that I found out from one of my roommates - and this was after the end of Beast Barracks, the start of the regular Fleet Year - that he and his family had been asked if they would have any objections if he roomed with a black Cadet, and -

Interviewer:

West Point asked his family that.

COL A. Hester:

Yes, mm-hmm, yes.

Interviewer:

Wow.

COL A. Hester:

And I never knew that until I don't know, summer reunion maybe 10 or 15 years ago.

Interviewer:

Wow. So I wonder now, just thinking as you say that, I'm wondering how many other people they asked that said "no."

COL A. Hester:

I have no idea. And I'm not even sure that - I assume they did the same thing with Joe and Jim and Hal, but I don't know that for a fact, but I've never talked to them about it. But we had, in that class we had six black Cadets, starting out.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

One guy left in the middle of Beast Barracks, or shortly after Beast Barracks, and the other guy left at right around Christmas time frame.

Interviewer:

Of Plebe year?

COL A. Hester:

Of Plebe year, yeah. And the four of us that graduated, obviously we stuck it out, but we were widely separated. I mean we had two guys in First Regiment, two guys in Second Regiment.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

In different Battalions and all that, so we got a chance to see each other not often, but as the year went on, we saw each other more and more.

Interviewer:

Interesting. And I guess that's one thing - and I think you and I have talked about this before off-camera, but it's one of those differences nowadays in the Corps in terms of the ability to communicate across Companies. Obviously, once they're done with Basic Training, with Beast Barracks, now, they have the computers and -

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Cell phones, and e-mail, and all the other modern conveniences.

COL A. Hester:

Well, the only thing you knew then was that you could, you saw each other at - didn't see each other very often in classes, because the classes were set up so you did -

Interviewer:

By Regiment, yeah.

COL A. Hester:

Regiment. And now - half-Regiments, as a matter of fact.

Interviewer:

Oh wow.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. But you could see each other on the weekends, and particularly like during Christmas when we were all there and the Upperclassmen were gone, we had an opportunity to socialize a lot.

Interviewer:

Yeah. I've heard from other graduates of the '60s, and even into the '70s, and not as much after that, that there was absolutely no consideration or no thought of any Plebe to go and go to another Company, to another Plebe's room.

COL A. Hester:

Oh no.

Interviewer:

It just wasn't done.

COL A. Hester:

No. Well, it was done - no. No, you're right, it was not done, because you didn't want to be hassled by the Upperclassmen going and coming, so you kind of stayed in your own little routine as much as you could.

Interviewer:

Right, okay. So you mentioned during Beast when that Officer came down the steps, and you thought, "Oh man, maybe this is going to come to an end," and it didn't. What was your view of the Officers, then after? In that example, obviously, it didn't stop, he was in on it, so to speak. What were your views of the other Officers that were there - TAC Officers, that kind of thing?

COL A. Hester:

You know, I almost had no view of them, because you didn't see them. You had no contact with them. I don't remember any TAC or anything like that. We saw Officers on the first day we got sworn in. We had a meeting in Thayer Hall or someplace - I'm assuming it was Thayer Hall - where they gave us a little orientation. I remember whoever talked to us saying, "Look to your left and right. One of you's not going to be here," and all that kind of stuff. And then we filed out, and the Cadre had us, and they had us for eight weeks, and I never - the only thing we did, they changed the Cadre in the middle of the Beast Barracks, 'cause we had to learn a new set of characters and all that. But that was it. I don't recall seeing - well, I mean I'd seen them, but no contact, no communications whatsoever.

Interviewer:

Now, when you got to the academic year, obviously you have Instructors teaching. What were your views of those guys, as Instructors, or as role model Officers? How did you see them?

COL A. Hester:

I didn't - I think the guy that stands out in my mind was the guy who was head of the Mathematical Department, Math Department. His name was * {:.person} COLonel Dick. And for whatever reason - I don't know what happened, he must've been guessing right or something - because I did real well on the math aptitude placement exam.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And so I got put in the Fourth Section of Math. And in those days we had like, I don't know, 30 Sections or something like that, so I'm up there with all these smart guys, and I felt lost. I mean we started out with calculus and all that right off the bat, and I'd had a little calculus in high school, but I hadn't had a lot, so. Anyway, I went to see him, and I'm not sure how I got there, but I talked to somebody and I went to see him, and I told him, "I'm not doing well here, and I don't want to flunk the course, and so I need to be put someplace else." And he put me in the very last Section, which was like dying and going to hell. And so I eventually moved up again, and I did pretty well academically, but the Instructors, they all had their little nicknames and reputations for the little idiosyncrasies that they had.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And so you kind of learned to deal with that. You know who you have to really be prepared to, and who you could talk to and kind of B.S. around with, and that kind of thing.

Interviewer:

Now, as I remember being told - they weren't doing it by the time I got to West Point, the early '90s. But in those days, they were still posting grades by name in the -

COL A. Hester:

Salad courts.

Interviewer:

Right, in the Salad Court, so everybody could see -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Where you stood.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Was that something that motivated Cadets, or was it just it was so normal that you didn't even really think about it?

COL A. Hester:

I think it motivated we like to say - and this is kind of an old tale here - it motivated probably about 15 or 20 people, at the bottom of the class and at the top of the class. Those guys who were fighting to be Star Men and to be number one, and those guys who were fighting to stay in. Everybody else, it didn't really make that much difference.

Interviewer:

That's interesting. I haven't heard that before; that's a good one. So what kind of a relationship - you mentioned the roommate that apparently West Point asked him and his parents if they were objectionable to rooming with you. What kind of relationship did you have with your roommates?

COL A. Hester:

Very good. My Plebe year was outstanding. In fact, I saw them all here a month ago. One kid, the one Cadet was from Michigan, the other guy from Utah, so that may have been why they specifically set that room up that way. But it didn't last long; it's only like six weeks, and you just change. It rotated, you know, so that first one, that's the one that I remember the most. We got along very well, and we are still friends today, so.

Interviewer:

And just for the record, you mentioned saw them a few weeks ago for your class's 50th reunion.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

It was in conjunction with 2015's graduation, which -

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Your class made quite a splash that week, so.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

That's interesting. You mentioned the other three African-Americans who graduated in your class.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

And you mentioned that you guys could get together sometimes on the weekends during Plebe year, and then during the Christmas time. As you moved through the years and you became more senior in the Cadet ranks, how did your relationship with those three guys change, and did you guys get together more often, or did you still kind of stay to yourselves, because you're just focused on what was in front of you?

COL A. Hester:

We got together more often. And as a matter of fact, Jim Conley, who is one of those four,

or three others, he and I became very close friends, to the point where he went - our first Yearling Christmas, when we got a chance to go home, he went home with me, because he lives, he's from Tacoma, Washington. And like a lot of Cadets in those days, didn't have a lot of money to go back and forth, and so the people from Illinois had leased an airplane, and so we flew on this airplane for like 50 bucks or something like that. And he went home to Chicago and stayed with me over Christmas, got a chance to meet my family and all that stuff. And we became very close friends. Joe Anderson and Hal Jenkins, we saw a lot of each other as Seniors and all that, and we all kind of did our own thing, but we got together a lot.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So do you think there was - did white cadets look at that as funny, that -

COL A. Hester:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer:

Oh, they did - that these four guys would go out of their way to get together?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Yeah, they did. And particularly if it was in a social setting, if you were dating a girl and something like that, and you go to the - I know it's not there anymore, but it was called Weapons Room to dance and all that. They kind of looked at you funny. You know, it was a

Interviewer:

But not in a hostile way, though.

COL A. Hester:

Not hostile, no, no.

Interviewer:

Interesting.

COL A. Hester:

And Jim Conley liked to dance, and he was always bringing whatever the ladies' dance was, and that was always something going on there.

Interviewer:

Now, on the couple of years ahead of you and the couple of years behind you - and I don't know if you've ever looked at this much - but your class stands out with the four African-American graduates. Let's see, we had one in '62, four also in '63, two in '64 that made it all the way through graduation -

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

And then behind you, three, two, and then your Senior year was the first big year - '68, the Plebes in '68.

COL A. Hester:

Right. Right.

Interviewer:

And I don't know exactly how many they started with, but I know they graduated ten, so I'm going to -

COL A. Hester:

Well, this is the class of '68?

Interviewer:

'68, yes sir.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. I don't

Interviewer:

I think they started with a few more, but not a ton.

COL A. Hester:

Yes; not a lot. I mean I got those numbers somewhere. But to get to what I think your

question is, we were very supportive of the classes behind us, and the way - because one of them, well, Ramsey, his brother was '63, and Bob was '67 or something like that.

Interviewer:

Yeah - '64 and '66.

COL A. Hester:

'64 and '66. And so while - after they graduated, we really made it a point to look after Bob. And there were a couple guys in there - I can't recall their names without look at the list, but they were fairly close. Now, you did not go out of your Regiment very often, so I lived in North Area. I mean the guys who were in North Area, which is primarily the Second and Third Battalion of the Second Regiment, you got a chance to see them, you helped them. But I didn't go over to First Regiment. I didn't go over to New South very often, anything like that, so. Just didn't do that.

Interviewer:

And that's just kind of the way things were in terms of the geographic separation of the Regiments.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Separation in classes -

COL A. Hester:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

So there wasn't much reason to be over there.

COL A. Hester:

No. No.

Interviewer:

I guess the hospital was over there in New South; that's about it.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Yeah. And you know, the library was over that way, and all that, but.

Interviewer:

Right. Interesting.

COL A. Hester:

I had been a Plebe, a Mail Carrier, a Regiment Runner as a Plebe, and it was very unpleasant to take mail over to the First Regiment, because the size differential was such that you go into one of those Flanker Companies and they'd just beat up on you 'cause they -

Interviewer:

Oh right - bunch of tall guys.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, the tall guys, I don't know.

Interviewer:

I had completely forgotten about the height thing.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

I described that to some Cadets one time, and they were like, 'Really?' I said, 'Yeah, it was all about parades.'

COL A. Hester:

It supposedly ended right before we got there, maybe a year or two, but the vestiges of it remained into the Upperclassmen were all the same height, and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer:

And the attitude, right?

COL A. Hester:

Oh, yeah, yeah. The little guys, they were terrible. I meanâ€¦

Interviewer:

Itâ€™s interesting now - just kind of an aside. That First Regiment was still, when I was a Plebe in 1990, I was in Fourth Regiment, and there is no way you could convince me to go do anything in First Regiment. And if we had a group project, they would come to us. We werenâ€™t going to First Regiment.

COL A. Hester:

Right. I donâ€™t know why it worked out that way.

Interviewer:

That has changed now, surprisingly, but.

COL A. Hester:

It has changed?

Interviewer:

Yeah. First Regiment was one of the most relaxed Regiments in the Corps this year, so itâ€™s interesting. But the other question I was going to ask is you mentioned you werenâ€™t going to go out of your way, different Regiment, that kind of thing. But within North Area, the parts of Second Regiment where you were, did you kind of feel that looking after those guys in the classes behind you was more important than the Fourth Class system, and all the rigid structure that West Point imposed?

COL A. Hester:

I donâ€™t know if Iâ€™d put it that way. I think it was, the important part of it was to give them confidence that all that stuff that was going on, they could survive it. Not only survive it, but they could thrive in it. I mean you reach a certain point - and you know this as well as I do - that somewhere along the line it clicks, you know, â€œThis is B.S. and all I have to do is put up with it and Iâ€™ll get through it,â€ so.

Interviewer:

Yeah, actually, I told a couple new Cadets that the other day before they went in, so.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

What about in terms of the Cadets of other minority groups? I know there was four Asians in your class, and a couple of others in the adjacent classes. Did you see any kind of a kindred spirit kind of role with them, or was it not a factor at all.

COL A. Hester:

No, not a factor at all. We had close to me, there was a guy from the Philippines, and also a guy from I want to say it was Costa Rica, and so they were treated kind of like most foreign Cadets are treated. Theyâ€™re not really hands-off, but theyâ€™re given a few breaks in terms of the languages, and the customs, and all those kind of things. They still go through the system, but the system is not as hard on them as it is for an average American.

Interviewer:

Thereâ€™s - always seemed to me thereâ€™s a lot less doubt that they were going to graduate, too.

COL A. Hester:

Well, they were probably allowed doubt, but also - and I donâ€™t know if this would be a fact - I probably shouldnâ€™t. But at least in those days, it was kind of an assumption that they came from a privileged class in their home countries, and -

Interviewer:

Or they wouldnâ€™t have been selected.

COL A. Hester:

They wouldnâ€™t have been there; thatâ€™s exactly right.

Interviewer:

That makes sense. Letâ€™s look at a slightly different aspect to Cadet life for just a few minutes. What kind of extracurricular activities were you involved in as a Cadet?

COL A. Hester:

I tried a couple athletic things, a round at the bat, baseball, and what else? I tried out track, and wasn't successful in those. I tried out for 150 and got cut after a while. Jim Conley was a State wrestling champ out of Washington, and so one of the things that he taught me after we had our wrestling classes, how to do more take-downs, and that's one thing, so I went out for the Plebe wrestling team. Made it for a while, was on the Plebe table - it gave me a chance to eat, to be honest.

Interviewer:

Ah - that's right.

COL A. Hester:

So I could get on the athletic table. Played, was on, what, I was elected to the Honor Committee, and I can't recall the other things that I did. Played a lot of pool, when I had a chance to do that.

Interviewer:

So within all those different things you tried out, same kind of a feeling in terms of weren't treated any differently?

COL A. Hester:

Oh no, no. Athletically, I just wasn't as good as the guys that were there. I didn't feel bad about it.

Interviewer:

Did West Point have what we now call the Fourth Class Sponsorship Program at that time

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COL A. Hester:

No.

Interviewer:

In terms of signing sponsors and -

COL A. Hester:

Well, they may have. I've heard people talk about a Plebe pop. Well, we didn't have any. There was no Plebe pop for me, anyway. I don't think Joe or Jim or Al did, either. Al might have, because he came - his father was career military, so he may have known some people. I got to know some people, enlisted people. Both Jim and I had a person who was a Sergeant in - where'd he work - somewhere on the Post Detail, I forget where he was now - but he kind of took us under his wing, and his wife. And so we'd go home some Sundays, we'd go to their house for dinner, and things like that. But not none of the Officers, no.

Interviewer:

Interesting. And I think I know the answer to this, but my assumption is that there weren't any African-American Officers -

COL A. Hester:

No. No.

Interviewer:

Assigned there at the time.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, there was one, and that was Arthur Ashe. He was a Tennis Coach.

Interviewer:

Oh - that's right.

COL A. Hester:

But he didn't have anything to do with us.

Interviewer:

Right. That's right, he was - his brief military service, all of which was spent as a Tennis Coach.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Exactly.

Interviewer:

Interesting. I forgot about him. That's interesting. Early '60s, obviously the Civil Rights Movement, greater American society, is starting at that point; probably not at its peak yet by the time you graduated, obviously. But was that on your radar at all as a Cadet?

COL A. Hester:

All the time. We used to have to read - one of the requirements was you had to read both papers - well, both - New York Times and whatever it was, the Herald Times or something like that.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And so it was always there in the news, and it was without a doubt the most uncomfortable thing for me, personally, because I felt like I was kind of hiding out. When I saw some of the pictures and read stories about like the Freedom Riders in '63, and the treatment that they received in the South, and the things at the lunch counters and all that, it just made me feel guilty that I wasn't there doing that. And I felt so - I was in awe of those people who left colleges and went there to do that, and I didn't do it. And to this day, I feel like, I wonder - I guess I made the right decision because I stayed there. But on the other hand, I still feel like I did not make the level of contribution probably that I could have at that particular period of time, and that bothers me to this day.

Interviewer:

Did you have friends from high school back home in Chicago that were participating, or?

COL A. Hester:

No. No, none that I know of right offhand.

Interviewer:

Some personal connection?

COL A. Hester:

No.

Interviewer:

That's interesting. Was that something you guys discussed among the four of you, by any chance?

COL A. Hester:

Oh yeah. Yeah, we did. We talked about it, and I think we had a general consensus that this is too much of an opportunity to pass, 'cause if you walk away, you're going to be giving it up. And you know, that's a hard point to accept, but that was kind of one of those selfish things, in my opinion, conclusions that we reached.

Interviewer:

Okay. Did you ever get the sense that the Academy was doing anything special to shine some attention on black Cadets in an attempt to either recruit more black Cadets, or assuage any kind of political pressure put on the Academy, in any way?

COL A. Hester:

Not as a Cadet.

Interviewer:

That's interesting. And I know you got heavily involved in Admissions later -

COL A. Hester:

Right, right.

Interviewer:

But we'll get to that in a few minutes, obviously, but not as a Cadet; okay. So what Branch did you end up choosing?

COL A. Hester:

Chose Armor just because, I don't know, I did. I liked the idea, and ironically, spent most of my career in Infantry units, as it turned out anyway.

Interviewer:

Now, had you guys done the - I don't remember what - I know the name, and I can't think of it right now - what you called it when you went around to the different posts and -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, but well, it wasn't the AOT. Yeah, it was the AOT. Yeah, we did all that. We went to all of the Branch Posts - Knox and Sill and Benning, what have you - and they put on these little demonstration for 458, and they tried to persuade you that they were the place to be.

Interviewer:

So you thought Armor was the most exciting?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, I liked the idea. I learned even - I guess I liked George Patton, Armor, and all that stuff, even when I was, World War movies and all that stuff, so that being at West Point kind of accentuated that. So I chose Armor, and with the idea of being a mainline Armor Officer, but I decided I wanted to go in an Airborne unit, and wound up 101st, which kind of set the pattern from that point.

Interviewer:

Right, right. So again, this is one I think I know the answer to, but let me let you tell me. Early '60s, was the word Vietnam on anybody's radar at West Point?

COL A. Hester:

Not early. It started popping up I would say probably - well, it would be the early '60s, '63, '64 kind of.

Interviewer:

Okay; so before you graduated.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, before we graduated. We started getting back speakers who had been in Vietnam, and the whole idea of counterinsurgency became a big issue and big topic, and people talked about it. Can't remember when this guy, Roger Donlon, won the Medal of Honor. I want to say it was like '63, '64. But at one point in time, he came back and talked to the group, and went through all that. So Vietnam was very much there. We all expected to go, and I would imagine we all wanted to go; I mean that was just kind of the nature of the beast, you know?

Interviewer:

Right. And by the time you graduated, they had just started sending conventional units, but prior to that, everybody was going and coming as advisors.

COL A. Hester:

Right. First the Marines went in, in I want to say March of '65.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

COL A. Hester:

And the units started following shortly after. In fact, 173rd went in in May of '65, because I was part of the - went in May of '66 as part of the one-year rotation, when that started.

Interviewer:

Okay. So what kind of military schools did you go to right out of graduation before you got to Vietnam?

COL A. Hester:

I went to - I didn't go to Basic Course. They stopped the Basic Course that summer in order to compress the time, availability of Officers to go to wherever they had to go. So I went to the 101st for about four weeks waiting for Flight and Airborne Rangers School. So I went to Airborne School for three weeks, and went to start Rangers School; graduated on a Saturday, went to Rangers School on a Monday. And came back, graduated from Rangers School in December, and went back to 101st for about three months, and went to Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you went into Vietnam summer of '66 as the first wave of replacements -

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

For the guys that had gone over with the unit initially, with the 173rd.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

So again, continuing your Infantry, your streak there.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Yeah, I went there. I was in the 1st, the 17th CAV, and 101st, and I went to a Company called D 16th Armor in the 173rd, supposedly going to the CAV unit in the 173rd. And I got there, and they had moved me over to the Armor unit, which the only difference was I was in PCs rather than Jeeps, which is what the CAV had vs. them.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

So I spent my whole year with D 16th Armor. We started out with a 90 millimeter anti-tank - well, what had been an Airborne unit was an Anti-Tank Gun unit. But we converted it over to PCs, and that's what I had the whole year there.

Interviewer:

So those were the Track Personnel Carriers?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Obviously not doing any Airborne operations or anything like that, but.

COL A. Hester:

We had an Infantry Battalion doing Airborne operations that I supported, but I didn't jump. But we went in and secured the area that they had secured within about an hour after they landed, but that was only the jump there.

Interviewer:

Now, at this point, this was all pre-Tet, obviously.

COL A. Hester:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer:

What was your view from the Lieutenant position of the American mission in Vietnam, how things were going? Did you have any sense of that, or was it all right in front of you and that was all you thought about?

COL A. Hester:

Most of it was right in front of me. I was a Platoon Leader, except for the last month, and that was XO then, but. So I just did what I was worried about doing, and we got a lot of missions, one thing or the other. And so we had people coming and going, and you know you worried about your people, and you worried about accomplishing the mission. Did it pretty well, I thought, and I thought what we were there to do was worth doing. You know, I felt like the common belief in those days, that if - this domino theory, if Vietnam falls, dah-duh-dah-duh-dah.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And as I look back at it, I'm not so sure anymore, but.

Interviewer:

Yeah. What was the racial climate like among the soldiers in the units at that time? Was there any noticeable black-white divide or anything like that?

COL A. Hester:

Nope. We had - I was the only black Officer in my Company, but of the other ones, the Company Commander was a guy that I had met before. He was a grandson of George Patton, and the name was John K. Waters, Jr., so I got along pretty well with him. And the two other Platoon Leaders, the other four Platoon Leaders, I knew a couple of those guys from Fort Campbell and other units, and I knew a lot of guys in the CAV from being from Fort Campbell, so it wasn't - no big issues there whatsoever. My Platoon Sergeant was white, but most of my Tank Commanders were black, so there were no big issues there whatsoever. As opposed to what happened in Vietnam later, I don't - there wasn't any, in my opinion, abuse of drugs and alcohol or anything like that.

COL A. Hester:

I mean we were a very professional unit in my view, at that point in time.

Interviewer:

Right. So it kind of went downhill later. You didn't end up going back to Vietnam again, did you?

COL A. Hester:

No, I didn't. I did not.

Interviewer:

Just that one time; okay.

COL A. Hester:

Once.

Interviewer:

Now, I do know, just from reading your bio, that you went to Germany after that year in Vietnam, was that right?

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Yeah? Could you tell a difference? Obviously, you hadn't been in Germany before, but I was kind of wondering if there was a difference in the level of professionalism, preparedness to do the mission, in Germany, based on the Vietnam War, or if that also took place later, in terms of the -

COL A. Hester:

I think initially what we had in Germany - I went to a Tank Battalion, was a Company Commander, and all that stuff. Initially what we had I thought was very good, but you could see it deteriorating over time. We got Officers who were not at the top of their game, let me put it that way, as Battalion Commanders and all that stuff, 'cause all those guys were in Vietnam. And so you got the same thing with NCOs, and so we became what I would call a - I don't know if flim-flam is the right way to do it. But instead of being very professional, we became sharp. The idea was have your uniform really starched shirts, and starched trousers, and yellow scarves, and we became parade soldiers, parade drill soldiers.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

COL A. Hester:

And so.

Interviewer:

Turned into more the look -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer:

Than the actual something behind it?

COL A. Hester:

Right. I had people who wouldn't know how to maintain a tank, but they looked good walking around it.

Interviewer:

And that got them promoted.

COL A. Hester:

That got them promoted, sure.

Interviewer:

Interesting. Did you have a lot of the soldiers - at this point, obviously, it's still a draft Army. Did you have a lot of the soldiers who had already been to Vietnam and didn't have much time left on their enlistment, and were really just kind of marking time in the unit?

COL A. Hester:

I don't think so. I think and the ones that I remember was that the draft people, I really hated to see the draft end, because when you got replacements who were draftees, sometimes you got people who were just not good. But most of the time you got people who were great, because you didn't - I mean I had Company Clerks who had master's degrees of one kind or another and things like that.

Interviewer:

Wow. Gotcha.

COL A. Hester:

So you just had to learn how to deal with those folks, and to take advantage of their skills and abilities that they had.

Interviewer:

That's interesting, because usually the perception, at least my generation, the perception is always the draftees brought in the unskilled and the -

COL A. Hester:

No, no.

Interviewer:

You know, only - that's an interesting principle.

COL A. Hester:

I'd look at it just the opposite. What I like about them more than anything else is that draftees gave you a real good sense of, a sharp sense of America. Because you got people from all over, and with all kinds of skills and attitudes, and so when you have a unit like that, and you mold it into a unit, it's a great thing. Rather than just being all the people with the same attitudes and aptitudes.

Interviewer:

That's interesting. What was Germany like in terms of your interactions with the German population?

COL A. Hester:

Germany at that point in time was just beginning to come back, and we - our Officer Club had been an old Nazi Officers Club, so you saw swastikas in the railings and all that kind of stuff. We were in a concern that had been a German concern during World War II, and so the vestiges of World War II were still there, but the German people, you could almost see it. Autobahns were back, the people, buildings were back, and all those kind of things, so I enjoyed Germany. We got an opportunity, my family, to travel a lot, not just in Germany but all over Europe, and it was a great time.

Interviewer:

So you were married with kids by this point?

COL A. Hester:

Married with kids, yeah.

Interviewer:

Did you find the German population receptive to black soldiers as much as white soldiers, or?

COL A. Hester:

Oh yeah. Because they hadn't - they were still half that little - I don't want to call it defeatist attitude, but they were not at the point where they could be arrogant yet.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

Because there were soldiers everywhere. I mean you couldn't go 20 miles without running into a concern. And they were the ones that had the money. They were the ones who - well, I don't know if they had the guns, but that - well -

Interviewer:

So it was a visible occupation still.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah; makes sense. So at this point, if I have my time line right, we get up to about the summer of '68, somewhere in that time frame, and you left Germany to go back to graduate school.

COL A. Hester:

I left Germany to go to the Advanced Course at Fort Knox.

Interviewer:

Oh, Advanced Course, okay.

COL A. Hester:

Went there for one year, and ironically, you asked about going back to Vietnam. This is how that not going back came about. I was all set to go back, and everybody in our class, in the Armor Officers Advanced Course, you either had just come back from Vietnam or were preparing to go back to Vietnam. And I got a call from somebody in the Military Personnel System asking me if I would be taking the job at West Point. The only requirement was that you had to have an advanced degree. And so if I could get an advanced degree in either three semesters or five quarters, then they'd give me that assignment. And this was like in May of '69. And so I had a good friend who had gone to Stanford, and he told me that Stanford worked on a quarter system, and so I got in Stanford, and got a degree in industrial engineering, and went to West Point the next summer.

Interviewer:

So you spent one year on campus to get that advanced degree that was the requirement for the job.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Now, at the time that they called you, sir, had they told you what the job was at West Point?

COL A. Hester:

Not really, I don't think so. I don't think they told me it was in Admissions. I could be wrong, but I don't recall it being that way. They just said, "We have a job at West Point, but it requires -" and I said, "Okay."

Interviewer:

So did the Army tell you to get the degree in industrial engineering, or was it just a degree?

COL A. Hester:

A degree. Any school, a degree.

Interviewer:

So what led you to the industrial engineering? Just that friend of yours that -

COL A. Hester:

No. I kind of liked industrial engineering when I looked at it from the point of view of combining systems and then what I would call pure engineering, but basically putting a systems look to it to do things rather than just do research or A RIM VAN or whatever.

Interviewer:

So at this point, you're about four years post-graduation. What was it like going back to school in a very civilian atmosphere?

COL A. Hester:

A little different. I think I was smarter in terms of the students. I did pretty well academically at West Point the last couple-three years. My freshman year was okay, but then I did much better the last few years. And out there, it wasn't - the demand wasn't nearly as much, as hard as I thought it would be. And to me, the distraction was the fact that I just didn't probably plan myself as well as I could, but I didn't have any problems academically. While I was there, I met a lot of people in industry, and I got offered some jobs. In fact, I did some work while I was there; I worked for Hewlett Packard for a while, running one of their - not running it, but in one of their labs, so it was interesting.

Interviewer:

So that was the very early phases of Silicon Valley, that kind of stuff?

COL A. Hester:

Exactly. As a matter of fact, David Packard, who was in the - I don't know, signer, or not the signer, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Bill Hewlett ran the company. But he was always in and around, but Packard wasn't, but anyway, we knew him. Knew of him, anyway.

Interviewer:

I always assumed there were people behind those names, but I never knew a thing about them. All I knew about Hewlett Packard was they made that calculator we had to use as Plebes.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

I didn't like it, so. That's interesting. How were you viewed by other grad students, civilians, in terms of, "Oh, that's the military guy?"

COL A. Hester:

I think it was kind of like that. We had - there was a series - on the West Coast in particular, in '69 and '70, there were a whole series of shutdowns, campuses and all that stuff. And so you didn't wear a uniform there. You were supposed to go to the ROTC office once a month and sign in so you'd be paid, and interestingly enough, during one of those time periods - in fact, it may have lasted more than one time period. But there was a young lady who was obviously pregnant protesting, and so she would lay on the floor on the entrance to the ROTC office, and you had to step over her to go in there, which was kind of a strange thing to do, but anyway.

Interviewer:

And that was kind of the height of the anti-war movement I would think.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

'69, '70, in Palo Alto, but. What was the faculty view in that same environment?

COL A. Hester:

Faculty view were that we were very serious students, and I think they relied on us, so you didn't get any kind of anti-military stuff coming from the faculty at that point. Now, I'm sure at some - Stanford - you know, we were in an engineering environment, so we were not in the liberal arts or social studies or anything like that, which probably that may have come from. But not in the area that I was in.

Interviewer:

Were you in a group of other Army Officers in that program, or just you and -

COL A. Hester:

Me, and maybe three or four others, but they came from different services. I think we had a guy from either the Marine Corps or Coast Guard, but not Regular Army.

Interviewer:

So there wasn't a strong Army.

COL A. Hester:

No. No, not at all.

Interviewer:

Okay. I didn't know if that was one of the things where a lot of people ended up there. That's what happens at a lot of the grad schools now, especially for the West Point guys; they send a lot of people to the same program, so. Now, you mentioned Admissions already, but obviously, that's what you ended up doing when you got to West Point in the summer of 1970. So as you're driving in that first time, what do you think five years later?

COL A. Hester:

Well, it was kind of interesting. I wanted to see how things had changed and all that. Never even had considered that I'd be back there, so it took a little while to break through then. But I had a wife and kids, and so a big part of that was getting, moving in, finding a place to stay. West Point was in the process of building the Stoney Lonesome Housing Area, but we didn't qualify for that. You had to be a Major, something like that, to get in, and I was a Captain at that point in time. And so we wound up going to Stewart.

Interviewer:

Okay, yep.

COL A. Hester:

And got a nice house out there and all that, kids in school and all, so.

Interviewer:

Now, at that point, 1970, they were also, on the Cadet side, in the process of enlarging the Corps, building new barracks, all that stuff should've been just about ending by that point, right, or close, maybe?

COL A. Hester:

It probably was close to it, because they started on it - on our Graduation Day, we were not even off the Post before they had the construction stuff going on, and so that's when it all started. So they had larger classes, and I don't remember how the numbers were right offhand, but I know that the rumor was in 1969, the class - well, class of '73 came in - everybody who was qualified was offered.

Interviewer:

Right. Interestingly enough, sir, I had that discussion the other day with the current Director of Admissions, and we were trying to remember which class it was, so that was '73 coming in, and '69.

COL A. Hester:

Right. All that anti-Vietnam stuff, class size increasing, it just created a perfect storm for -

Interviewer:

If you wanted to come, come on.

COL A. Hester:

Come on, yeah, exactly. Anybody who was qualified got in.

Interviewer:

Wow. That's - I mean it doesn't say any less about the people who showed up, but -

COL A. Hester:

No, oh no.

Interviewer:

It is an interesting statistic.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah; right.

Interviewer:

Wow. So what do you remember being told about the job you were going into there in the summer of 1970 in the Admissions Office?

COL A. Hester:

Well, in the summer of 1970, I went there and I was assigned as a regular Admissions

Officer. I had an area, five states - Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, New Jersey, and one other one I can't remember now.

Interviewer:

So kind of a weird mix of states there.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, it was called the Middle States, and it just - it was geographically based on how many Congressional Districts and all. They tried to split it up so everybody had about the same workload. And so my job was to attract, and to recruit, and to do the initial evaluation of people out of those five states. Delaware, that was the other state. And so I learned all the little tricks of the trade in terms of traveling, and evaluating forms, and going to *
{:person} COLlege Nights, and going to groups and speaking. And at the same time, a guy who was there in what was called Equal Admissions Opportunity Officer, Cornell Mc*
{:person} COLLum, he was, I kind of gravitated toward him. And because after while it became clear he was going to be leaving and I was going to be taking his place, so I got to learn that portion of his job. Which was not dramatically different, but the focus was different.

Interviewer:

Right. So you were doing the regional travel -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And I know that's a lot of travel.

COL A. Hester:

Oh, yeah, it was.

Interviewer:

What kind of effect were you seeing from the Vietnam War still at that point? Was it as bad as '69?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Yeah, it was tough. But fortunately, I didn't have to do with - it wasn't just a matter of minority kids. I had to face it all the time, and so you got a much broader audience, and the impact was less. Particularly the - I shouldn't say it that way. It wasn't greater in the black community than in the majority community, but it was there. But anyway, I don't - it didn't hamper me from doing what I needed to do in terms of going into various places. Had a lot of contact with Congressional people, Congressional offices in those areas, and they would arrange things. You know, you go to high schools, and you go by - the Admissions Office had a great history of their feeder school where they came from, and so you made sure you had good contact with those people, the counselors and all that, a lot of letter-writing. And I am kind of a very meticulous person in terms of notes and all that stuff, so I did what I considered a very good job of tracking my people.

When I'd get my little report every week I'd know who needed what, and I'd call them on the phone, "Hey, you got to do this. Did you do that? Did you take the PAE?" You know, whatever.

Interviewer:

Right, and this is all phone calls and letters.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, exactly. And so I developed a series of that. We had shared secretarial support, and the secretary that I had, that I shared with somebody else, but anyway, I developed a series of about, I don't know, 45 paragraphs. And I'd be in Delaware, and I'd call her up and say, "Send Jimmy Jones paragraph 2, 7, 5, and 10," because it was all there, you know. So I didn't have to draft a letter every time; I'd just code it, and she would send it.

Interviewer:

Now, it won't surprise you to hear, sir, just in talking to a couple of different Admissions

Officers recently, they have the same thing today.

COL A. Hester:

Oh yeah, I'm sure.

Interviewer:

It's just on a Word document, and they literally copy and paste it into an e-mail and send it to Jimmy to tell him, "You need to do these three things," and save themselves hours of time in doing that same e-mail 20 times in the same day. So maybe they took on your system.

COL A. Hester:

I don't know; they could.

Interviewer:

Now, you mentioned Cornell Mc* {:.person} COLlum.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

And his name has certainly come up several times in discussing Minority Admissions in the early years. And his title was the Equal Opportunity Admissions Officer, and he was -

COL A. Hester:

Well, actually it was Equal Admissions Opportunity Officer - Equal Opportunity is a current phrase.

COL A. Hester:

EAOO was its name.

Interviewer:

EAOO. He was the second person in that job, if I remember correctly. Was he a Captain also at that time, or was he a Major?

COL A. Hester:

No, he was a Lieutenant * {:.person} COLonel - yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay, so he was a little higher-ranking.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. He's class of '57 or '55, somewhere in there.

Interviewer:

I've got it here somewhere.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. But he had been preceded by a guy by the name of Ed Banks, and Banks was class of '63.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And - but Banks did leave the Army, and so Banks started it, and then Mc* {:.person} COLlum came in right after that.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

And he was there about a year before I got there, I think.

Interviewer:

Okay. So - and you mentioned similar type of thing you were doing as a Regional Admissions Officer, but with a different focus.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, you focused on minority kids, and you focused on primarily blacks, and that whole thing was driven - and I don't know what the official policy came from - but that was kind of like an understanding. You got more blacks in the military, and the Civil Rights, they were getting a lot of heat, "they" being the military was getting heat from minority

Congressional staff and also from the military Department of Defense as a whole, to increase the number of officers at the Military Service Academies, at the Service Academy. And so it was up, as I saw it, it was up to everybody to go out and get some more *
{:.person} COLored people, basically, is what it boiled down to. And so you go talk to groups, and you talk to areas where you had more minority people, and to get them attracted to come to the Military Academy.

Interviewer:

Right. Now, did you feel like your job was - easier is not the right word, but at least more familiar in the same areas that you were working before than it was in areas that youâ€™d never been to?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Yeah, it was easier then, because I knew them. But I didnâ€™t - some of the areas outside of my region I did not know very well, and I didnâ€™t know who the contacts were, although Mc* {:.person} COLlum gave me a lot of information and all that. But it certainly was easier in the areas that Iâ€™d been in previously. But it was a little bit more difficult, because you had to deal with - me dealing with more black candidates, and specifically when the Admissions Office is looking to you to be the person to bring in. That was kind of like, â€œI donâ€™t know if this is working right,â€ itâ€™s - you know.

Interviewer:

Do you remember back then if we had the concept of class composition goals, in terms of a number or percentage that we wanted to achieve? Or was it just always more than last year?

COL A. Hester:

It was practically more than last year, and it changed during the period of time, my last year that I was there and BILL LINGALINâ€™s first year. And we finally got a policy. Before that, it had been, â€œOh, itâ€™d be a great idea to bring in more minority Cadets.â€ And somehow they idealized, got â€œOh, letâ€™s shoot for 75, 80, 100, whatever.â€ Whatever the number of the day was, thatâ€™s what people felt like they could do. Well, that was hard to do, but what made it even more difficult is that there was no coalescing around what weâ€™re trying to do here. I mean it was not an institutional thing; it was a thing between * {:.person} COLonel Rogers, who was Director of Admissions, and perhaps the Academic Board, and perhaps the Superintendent, in terms of, â€œHey, that would be a good thing to do.â€

But there was no institutional focus on this being what is needed because it is within the self-interests of the military and the Military Academy to do so.

Interviewer:

Thatâ€™s interesting that you say that, â€œcause Iâ€™ve asked a similar question to other people involved in Admissions, and one of the things that most of them have said, in one way or another, recent involvement in Admissions is that it is changing now to be more of an Academy focus, not just, â€œHey, Admissions, go figure this out.â€

COL A. Hester:

Right. Right. Right.

Interviewer:

So thatâ€™s interesting to hear you say that - unprompted even. You mentioned * {:.person} COLonel Rogers; thatâ€™s Manley Rogers that was the Director of Admissions for, gosh, almost two decades, I think.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Long time there, so. Did you ever get any guidance on what to do, how to do it, from your boss, or was it you had your marching orders, go out and do it?

COL A. Hester:

Iâ€™d get - well, he was not my direct boss. It was a guy by the name of Charlie Watkins, who was a Lieutenant * {:.person} COLonel, who was my real boss; he was the Deputy.

Interviewer:

Okay; Deputy, sure.

COL A. Hester:

And - but * {:.person} COLonel Rogers was a very hands-on person in terms of not so much telling you how to do things, but he was very supportive. And part of that I think was driven by the fact that at that point in time, I was on the whatever they call it, Board of Trustees for the Association of Graduates, and so I had an opportunity to see him as part of on the Academic Board or whatever. You know, interacted with the Board, AOG and all that kind of stuff, so there was a little interaction there. He used to have these things at his house for social things, and so I saw him there and all that, so he was very supportive of me in that respect. But he didnâ€™t tell you what to do and how to do it.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

But if I had a particular hard case, and he ran the Admissions Committee, and so occasionally, I would want to do something. And normally what would happen is that the Admissions Officer would prepare the file, and * {:.person} COLonel Watkins would approve it. And then it would go to the Admissions Committee and they would consider it within the confines of their meetings. On occasion, he would have me come into the Admissions Committee, and present the case, and I could persuade them or not. I never did that for the Academic Board, went to the Board; I didnâ€™t do that, but Admissions Committee, yes.

Interviewer:

Yeah; thatâ€™s interesting. Most of us graduates are not ever desirous of going to an Academic Board meeting.

COL A. Hester:

No. No, I donâ€™t think so. No.

Interviewer:

No thank you. So weâ€™ve mentioned that youâ€™re doing a lot of traveling in both of those jobs. So weâ€™ll get to the Association of Graduates piece in a minute, but what other kind of things did you find yourself involved with on post there, whether it was with Cadets or not, but just other outside-the-office activities? And I know you got a wife and kids at home at this point over in Stewart, so -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, I have kids, and all that.

Interviewer:

Commuting.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, I didnâ€™t. We had a very active social calendar with the Officers of my class, and with the people even who were not West Point grads. There was significant - no, I wonâ€™t say significant - about five or six guys who were black and Officers assigned to West Point who were ROTC grads.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

And got to be good friends with them.

Interviewer:

Now, were -

COL A. Hester:

And so we played a lot of cards, and drove up to the city for plays and stuff, one thing and the other.

Interviewer:

And I know at some point - I might be getting my time lines mixed up here, but I know at some point, Joe Anderson was back on post.

COL A. Hester:

He came just as I was leaving. He came in '73.

Interviewer:

Okay, so you didn't overlap with him.

COL A. Hester:

No.

Interviewer:

What about the other three classmates of yours?

COL A. Hester:

Hal - Hal Dickens came. He was in Social Sciences about the last year that I was there.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

And Jim Conley had left the Army at that point, but he was living in Connecticut, and so we saw a lot of each other.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, you mentioned other black Officers on post, so this is in just, you know, a little over five years, a significant shift from when you were a Cadet.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

And there were none.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

So were these other grads, or non-grads, or both?

COL A. Hester:

Other than Joe and Hal, these were non-grads, and they were ROTC guys who were either in the OPE, Physical Education -

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

Or there was some other military Department; I can't recall what it was.

Interviewer:

The -

COL A. Hester:

OMI or something.

Interviewer:

Military Instruction, yeah, there you go.

COL A. Hester:

And a Coach, one of the Coaches was black.

Interviewer:

Okay; yeah.

COL A. Hester:

No, Hal was in, he was a TAC, and Joe came in later and was in Social Sciences.

Interviewer:

Right. So you've got a lot of travel to get these guys into West Point, these African-American males, all males still at this time, obviously.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Once they got to West Point, did you still feel some kind of maybe responsibility is too strong of a word, but obligation of some kind to keep track of them, keep up with them, see how they're doing, that kind of thing?

COL A. Hester:

Not the Plebes.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

I'm not sure how this came to be, but it was almost like discouraged to interfere with the classes where you had no responsibility, because they had TACs, and they had Sponsors, and folks like that, and you - so. But for the Upperclassmen, you know, we had an active social. You know, they'd come out to the house, and that was the only place where they could drink beer if they wanted, and all that kind of stuff. And so yeah, we did that.

Interviewer:

So a lot different than what you experienced.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer:

Well, you mentioned some NCOs, but -

COL A. Hester:

Right, but yeah.

Interviewer:

But that kind of thing.

COL A. Hester:

We'd have, you know, picnics, and dinner. Not parties, but bring them over for dinner, and all that stuff and so on.

Interviewer:

Sure. Interesting. So let's shift gears again, sir. You mentioned that you were on the AOG Board of Trustees at that time, was what it's called?

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

So how did that come about? It seems like a very odd -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Occurrence for a Junior Captain.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, I know. It was odd. It was -

Interviewer:

Not in a bad way.

COL A. Hester:

No, to be perfectly honest with you, I think the same storm was building where the AOG was viewed as this old fossil organization, and so they were looking to make it young - they're being I'm not sure who it was. But anyway, I was asked by - first I was told by a friend of mine, a guy who won the Medal of Honor in Vietnam later on, but - no, he won it in the early '60s. He said, 'We're looking to put somebody on the board. Would you be interested?' 'Sure, why not?' So * {:.person} COLonel Rogers asked me, and that's how it came to be.

Interviewer:

What year was that, sir, do you remember?

COL A. Hester:

I went in '70, 1970. I was there right when -

Interviewer:

So when you got there.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Wow.

COL A. Hester:

Right after I got there - or maybe it was '71, but the last couple years was when I was on the Board.

Interviewer:

Okay. And what did that entail? Is that just going to the meetings?

COL A. Hester:

It entailed going to the meetings, and participating in all of the social events. This was before the - no, I guess it wasn't. The Thayer Award was already going on, so that was part of it. Not, you know, voting, I mean, but voting after somebody had already made the nominations and everything. I didn't go out and look for people or do that, but. They had, you know, dinners, and one thing or the other. They were a kind of unofficial fund-raising organization, and so if the Sup wanted something done and he couldn't get it done through Army funds, then he could go to the AOG and they'd beat on people to give them money and get something done.

Interviewer:

Right. I know it's not anywhere close to what they're doing now in that regard, but I know that was still going on then, but. So one of the more well-known stories in that time frame in terms of AOG's involvement in things going on on the official side concerns the proposal by President Nixon in the spring of '71 for this Confederate Monument at West Point. Do you remember how it came to the AOG discussion, or how AOG got involved in it, or?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, I remember how I got involved in it. It was told to me, it was told to us at a meeting that the President had seen Battle Monument and asked where the Confederate Monument was, or if there was one, and was told there wasn't. And he wanted to know why and all that kind of stuff, and so there was a proposal that came from President Nixon or somebody in his office to put one at West Point. Now, as I over the years of talking to * {:.person} COLonel Seidule and other folks that there was much more of a formal effort than what I was aware of, the letters going back and forth to the Superintendent. I wasn't privy to any of that.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

COL A. Hester:

But I did, I was part of discussions at the AOG. And so it came to us we need to raise money, and I don't remember what the amount was, but you know, probably insignificant today, but it was significant in those days. And so there was a vote, and I spoke out against it, and it didn't help. It still passed. But one the things, one of the people on the board, and turned out that he and I developed a relationship over the years. It was Frank Borman, the astronaut.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And so -

Interviewer:

He's class of '50, I think?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, I want to say '50, yeah.

Interviewer:

Something like that.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. And maybe in '51 or 2, somewhere in there. But anyway, in that time frame. And he and I would have these long discussions. He said, "You should not - let's fight this fight another way. Let's take it another way. Let me be the conduit to get to the Nixon White House," and he did that. He talked to people there, and I think - oh, what's the guy's name - I ran into him in Europe one time - who - Alexander Haig.

Interviewer:

Haig, right.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Haig was the front man in the Nixon White House for it.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And Borman could get to him. And so they had a discussion back and forth a number of times, and at some point in time, Borman called me at home one night and said, "It's done. It's over with. Don't worry about it anymore," and it just died.

Interviewer:

Interesting. Now, was Mr. Borman still on active duty at that time? He was -

COL A. Hester:

Oh no. No. He was an astronaut, and he had been in space and all that stuff, so he was - as a matter of fact, he was either the CEO or a Principle at TWA or one of the airlines.

Interviewer:

One of the airlines; interesting. That sounds familiar, now that you say that, but obviously he was cognizant of his celebrity, maybe, is it?

COL A. Hester:

Oh yeah, he had enough juice.

Interviewer:

And he wasn't afraid to use it.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. No, he was not. He was one of the people - that group, if I remember the composition, it was like 36 people, and we had a Executive Director, and a President, and all that stuff. And I was a junior guy, and actually, Borman was one of the junior guys, too, relatively speaking.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

But most of the people who were on it were guys who had graduated in the '20s and '30s.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And you know, so. And I remember specifically saying, you know, if I resigned my Commission to go down and join the whatever the local group was in New York City in those days that was anti-everything, you guys going to -

Interviewer:

Black Panthers or something like that, right?

COL A. Hester:

Mm-hmm - you guys going to put a - not "you guys" but - you going to have a statue here for me 100 years from now?

Interviewer:

Not likely.

COL A. Hester:

Don't think so. And I tried to put it in more delicate terms than that. But the proposal was passed, and they agreed to raise the money, and then later on it died, and I think the

Superintendent withdrew the request.

Interviewer:

You mentioned some of the guys in the '20s and '30s. I know just a couple of names that were big in their own time, and for World War II primarily, and then one later. But Lemnitzer -

COL A. Hester:

Lemnitzer, yeah.

Interviewer:

That's a tongue twister there. He graduated in '20, I believe, and was obviously big name in World War II and Korea, I think.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, right. He was Chief of Staff of the Army at one point of time, I believe.

Interviewer:

Right, right; after - I want to say right before Vietnam.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And then Harold K. Johnson, another Chief of Staff of the Army. I believe he was Chairman of Joint Chiefs also.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Now, those guys were all on the Board too, right?

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, and I don't remember how they voted, but if they did whatever they did, I don't think they did it, you know, very vocally.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

There was - the only people who spoke against it - I mean who spoke out - I was against it, and everybody else was for it. As a matter of fact, I got kind of chastised, because one of the people - I want to - oh, I don't know which one it was - said, "Well, both of my grandfathers served in the Civil War, one on the Union side and one on the Confederate side. Why would we treat one person differently than the other?" I said, "Because one was a traitor and the other one wasn't," and it was plain and simple.

Interviewer:

Right. Simple answer.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

You asked a simple question, I gave you a simple answer.

COL A. Hester:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

You know, this guy swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States and abrogated his oath, so you going to put a statue for him?

Interviewer:

Right. And you said that answer was not well received?

COL A. Hester:

No, it wasn't well received. You know, maybe I'd better walk out of the room backwards so I don't get stabbed in the back or something like that.

Interviewer:

Well, was that - I mean and I think you probably weren't the only one, perhaps, but as an Active Duty Officer, still -

COL A. Hester:

I think General Groves at that point in time was on the Board, and he was a either Division or District Engineer.

Interviewer:

The Manhattan Project Groves, or his son?

COL A. Hester:

His son, I believe, yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you got a couple of Active Duty guys out of a large group; obviously a very small number of whatever you define, how you want to define junior in this large group of people. And you're one of the very few that are making a vocal opposition -

COL A. Hester:

Right. Right.

Interviewer:

And obviously Frank Borman.

COL A. Hester:

There was one black guy there, too, but he didn't speak. What's his name - he didn't say anything.

Interviewer:

One of the other earlier grads?

COL A. Hester:

Mm-hmm. I'll look that up and tell you who that was.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

I just don't recall who it was right now.

Interviewer:

Interesting. Well, I mean obviously the list of suspects is not long, but.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, it's not long. I just got dinner with him.

Interviewer:

And he was also on the Board at that time?

COL A. Hester:

Board of Trustees, yeah.

Interviewer:

That's interesting. And I guess the interesting thing that we grapple with now is as we hear this story, and I've heard it several times by my boss in different venues, current Cadets have a really hard time imagining that the President of the United States would ever open his mouth to even propose something. Not to mention go through the whole funding process and all that. Was there ever any sense among the AOG Board, at least, of you know, why are we doing this in the first place? Why are we even having this discussion? Or -

COL A. Hester:

No, I don't think so. I think it was - there is - and it's just my thoughts. During that period of time, and even before then, there was kind of a romantic thought that these guys were gallant. They, you know, they were our brothers; they just happened to be on the other side of the fever, but.

Interviewer:

Yeah, right.

COL A. Hester:

You know, but they're like us. And I looked at an article coming over here from the New

York Times in 1964, and they talked about the split between - that happened at West Point, and the great reunion that happened, I don't know, 1870s or '90s or something, whenever that reconciliation occurred.

Interviewer:

The 1870s, I think it was; right.

COL A. Hester:

And that supposedly healed all those wounds. And what it didn't heal is the fact that the Civil War was principally a slavery issue, and so black Americans, it hadn't healed for us yet, so.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And when I was a Cadet, you know, a guy would run around with Confederate flags, and they played Dixie a lot, and all that stuff. It was just a normal thing.

Interviewer:

And that was 100 years removed.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So slightly different aspect of this same situation - the Manifesto. So again, this is completely separate from the AOG procedure going on at the time.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

What do you remember about how that came about?

COL A. Hester:

I remember there was some discussions about it, that it was going to be written and that. I'm sure that Percy Squire was probably the principle author, but I don't know that for a fact. I don't, just don't recall how it came about. But it was we had some meetings among the black Officers, and Percy and a couple other guys, Cadets, read it to us, and asked us to support them, and most of us did. Because we all felt like something needed to be done, and it was driven not only by what was going on with the Confederate statue, but that was a big part of it.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL A. Hester:

That was kind of like the coalescing idea - not idea, but the fact that came about to bring it all, brought it to a boil. And some of the things that the Cadets brought up, we didn't even really consider or know about, because it was -

Interviewer:

From the Officer perspective?

COL A. Hester:

From the Officer, yeah, exactly; 'cause we didn't see it, we didn't know any fact about -

Interviewer:

It was in the barracks.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Do you remember what some of those were, kind of things, examples?

COL A. Hester:

I guess we did not - you know, somebody probably could've pointed out we didn't have enough black Instructors; yeah, we didn't have them anywhere at any other school, either. So our perspective relative to what they thought vs. what we had seen

before, it was a big improvement; vs. theirs being, "Oh, this is nothing."

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

So that's one. I don't remember what the other items were in the Manifesto, but there was a couple of things that if I looked it up I probably could ____.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Now, you said, you know, most of the other black Officers, yourself and the other black Officers signed it. But at that point, was there anything going through your mind as okay, bottom line, the Army's still a discipline-based organization. What am I risking by signing this document?

COL A. Hester:

Sure. Yeah, and that was true not only just at West Point, but it was going on at other places as well in the Army. You know, what are black Officers supposed to do here? The thing about haircuts as an example, and how to wear the uniform, and all those subjects were being talked about, if not on the front, they certainly were being talked about within among black Officers. And so I can recall some conversations that I had at various places about race relations and how the Army was addressing those things, and how the discipline issues were in the Army, and all that. I mean there was always those things bubbling up, and so it was nothing new. It was just about how far do I go? How far do I go with this without risking my career, basically.

Interviewer:

Right. Now, we mentioned Lieutenant * {:.person} Colonel Mc* {:.person} Column earlier. He was gone by this point, I think.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

Were there other I'll use the word senior - maybe Lieutenant * {:.person} Colonel, * {:.person} Colonel - black Officers on post that you remember, or were they mostly we're talking mostly a junior Officer kind of -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, we were all junior Officers; we didn't have any real senior Officers I don't recall, that were black.

Interviewer:

The only senior one I can think of that I know of, at least, and I think it might've been just after this time that we're talking about, was when Hugh Robinson was a Regimental TAC. And I think that was -

COL A. Hester:

No.

Interviewer:

I think that was after this.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

So.

COL A. Hester:

I knew him, but I didn't know him until after he'd left the Army.

Interviewer:

Okay. So there was that thought, though, of, "Hey, I'm putting something on the line here." Do you remember talking about it with your wife at all?

COL A. Hester:

Don't think so. I might have, but I don't remember it.

Interviewer:

That's interesting. And you said most of the, to your knowledge, most of the black Officers signed it.

COL A. Hester:

Mm-hmm. The I have a copy of it, and the letter that I've got says everybody signed it except for three or four people. A couple people were not present; one person elected not to sign it.

Interviewer:

Do you remember why that person elected not to sign it, or was -

COL A. Hester:

No. Maybe he was, you know, concerned about what he was putting on the line. I don't know.

Interviewer:

Yeah; that's interesting. So who did the Cadets deliver the Manifesto to? Was that to the Superintendent?

COL A. Hester:

The Superintendent, General Knowlton.

Interviewer:

How'd that go?

COL A. Hester:

I think it went okay. He was kind of a very - you know, he was more of an educator than a, you know, hard, fire-breathing kind of Officer you might expect. But I don't recall hearing Percy or anybody saying any bad thing about it; I mean nothing, we never got called in and chewed out, or Cadets didn't get dismissed or anything.

Interviewer:

That's one way to know.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Yeah, so.

Interviewer:

And then obviously we know the Nixon proposed monument just fell away, not going to happen, but do you know if they got any traction on some of the other things that they had asked for, or identified as grievances in this Manifesto?

COL A. Hester:

No, I don't know that for a fact. I left not too long after that. When I say not too long, I'm not sure what the date of the Manifesto was, but it must've been the '72 time frame.

Interviewer:

I want to say it was late '70 - or I mean, sorry, late in the spring semester of '72, 'cause Percy Squire graduated in June of '72, so -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

It was before he graduated.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

So I'm not exactly sure, either, to be honest with you, but.

COL A. Hester:

I remember getting into those situations particularly with black Cadets at that point in time about graduating other than the traditional Graduation Day. Being that a lot of them had to go to something - not a lot, I don't mean to sound that way.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

A lot of Cadets had to go to summer school in order to graduate. Percy fell into that slot;

Percy and a couple other guys, if I remember correctly. And there was concerns about that, and there was some finger-pointing about it, you know, theyâ€™re making a special deal for these guys and all that, but it wasnâ€™t, so.

Interviewer:

At one point I know there was talk, and I havenâ€™t found anything to support it actually happened or not, but talk of the black Cadets doing something to take over the Mess Hall, almost in the same fashion you mentioned earlier with the Stanford guys.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. There were some discussions about that, and I donâ€™t think it happened. I think they got talked out of it, but.

Interviewer:

Okay. And you know obviously that would be a very visible symbol of -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer:

Not to be taken lightly, and maybe that wouldâ€™ve been too far, I donâ€™t know. Now, were you still there when the black Cadets primarily put forth and then executed the Concert for the Blood? Were you there for that?

COL A. Hester:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Okay. You know, what was General Knowltonâ€™s reaction to that?

COL A. Hester:

I think it was just not, it wasnâ€™t enthusiastic acceptance, but it was official acceptance, because they did it up at Michie Stadium.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And it was an idea to basically - I donâ€™t know if it was an idea to placate the black Cadets, but it was worth doing. At that point in time, sickle cell anemia was a big topic, and you know, unfortunately, it rained like crazy during the concert.

Interviewer:

I read that in some - I was reading some old newspaper articles about it, and they said that the -

COL A. Hester:

It still was good, though.

Interviewer:

The crowd was much less than expected because of the downpour.

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

But I was reading some things where they were expecting over 50,000 people, and it was much less because of the rain, and -

COL A. Hester:

I donâ€™t know what the number was, but I know it was a long day, so.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Thatâ€™s interesting. I mean but even today, that seems to me as a very - thatâ€™s a pretty strong statement from a bunch of cadets, to organize a concert with some headline names at that time to come into West Point. Kind of makes you wonder how these guys had time to do anything else.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah. Well, they had some help. I mean there was some of the Officers who were, more so than I was, who was involved with Cadets on a regular basis, helped them out with some of

that. And I did not specifically, other than the fact that I knew Percy, and you know, not real well, but I knew that he was one of the guys who were the leaders of that whole effort, and so anyway.

Interviewer:

Interesting. Now, you said you left at the end of that, or the summer of '72.

COL A. Hester:

Actually, I left the summer of '73.

Interviewer:

'73, excuse me.

COL A. Hester:

Went back to Germany. I had some notions of staying there. At that point in time, they were looking at maybe it happened a little bit before then. But they made the not-Heads permanent, you know, the Deputy Heads permanent positions, so they decided to make the Deputy Admissions Officer, I mean Head of Admissions, permanent. And I considered applying for that job; as a matter of fact, I was encouraged to apply for it. But the Chief of Armor at that point in time was a guy by the name of Julius Becton, who was black, and he was at West Point for something - I'm not sure what it was.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

In the summer of '73, and I mean I didn't - but I got a call saying, "Colonel Becton wants to talk to you." Oh boy, what have I done now? So I went over to see him, met him over at the Officers Club, and he said, "You need to get out of here. You know, you need to go and do your real job, and that's in the Army, not at West Point." "Yes sir." So away I went.

Interviewer:

This is the same General Becton that went on to lead the D.C. School System in retirement and all the other jobs -

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, that's right. That's right, yep.

Interviewer:

He did a bunch of things that -

COL A. Hester:

Yep.

Interviewer:

In trouble.

COL A. Hester:

I went back to Germany.

Interviewer:

So how long did you stay in the Army after that; what did the rest of your career look like after Germany?

COL A. Hester:

I went to Germany and spent three years there. I came back from Germany and I went to the Air Command Staff College in Montgomery, Alabama, and it was okay, but I would rather have gone to Leavenworth, 'cause I wanted to be with friends and all of those, you know, but it was an interesting thing to do that. I mean and left there, and I went to Fort Bragg, and was part of the Course Book Command, Third Course Book Command, for about a year. And then I wrangled my way into a Battalion over in the 82nd, and became XO of basically the Tank Battalion over there; it was a CAV unit.

Interviewer:

Right; yep.

COL A. Hester:

And I ran into a situation that really caused me some issues with the Army, and I decided to

leave, and I couldn't do that for a year because I had orders going to Korea. So I went to Korea and came back and left; ended my tour.

Interviewer:

So what year was that when you left the Army?

COL A. Hester:

I left the Army in 1981.

Interviewer:

'81, so it's still a pretty long career.

COL A. Hester:

Yeah, I had 16 years on Active Duty, and then I went in the Reserves, and I retired when I reached age 60.

Interviewer:

Okay. That's a pretty long career, by any stretch. Just out of curiosity, did you stay involved with Admissions at all -

COL A. Hester:

I did.

Interviewer:

In any way after you left West Point?

COL A. Hester:

That was what I did from the time I left the Active Army in 1981 until I retired in 2002. I was a Liaison Officer. Wherever I was, I did that same job, and I was what they call in Individual Ready Reserves, and so I did all that.

Interviewer:

You did your time each year, and then just working with candidates in whatever local area you were in?

COL A. Hester:

Right, exactly.

Interviewer:

And I know, and that's, you know, you won't be surprised to know that was one of the key components of the program that * {:.person} COLonel McDonald talked about with us the other day in an interview, in terms of the - she quoted the number off the top of her head. I don't remember what it was exactly, but the several hundred Reservists like yourself that, you know, were out in the communities doing the local legwork -

COL A. Hester:

Right.

Interviewer:

That her five Regional Officers can't possibly do all of.

Interviewer:

Right, exactly.

Interviewer:

And that's, in that role, what kind of changes do you think you could observe over, you know, we're talking now over 20-something years' involvement with the Admissions Office. What kind of changes did you see over time in terms of either minority recruiting or in general?

COL A. Hester:

I don't do minority recruiting as such; it's whatever area I'm in at the time. And I haven't done that now for the last five or six years, although I do still support - when the Regional Officer comes out here, they go and do whatever they have to do, and I know who the local Liaison Officer is.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

He's got some kind of activity that he needs help, I go do it. But I'm not part of that

organization.

Interviewer:

Right. Okay.

COL A. Hester:

Iâ€™m just a volunteer. In terms of changes, I think I see a definite shift from where it was very difficult to get people interested in West Point to where now there are a lot of people who are interested. And so what you do now, the recruiting is more focused on those ones that you really want to get, not just those you want a number or something like that. You really want to get this athlete, you want to get this scholar, you want to get this person who has some special skill, whether itâ€™s music, or whatever, to add some extra worth to the class. And I think thatâ€™s a plus. When we were there a month ago, they told us that itâ€™s the largest group of candidates theyâ€™ve had in years, so I guess itâ€™s all working.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Over your Army career, or in the civilian world, maybe, you hear a lot of times people will say, â€œOh well, weâ€™re putting all this extra effort in minority recruitment, or minority development,â€ or whatever it might be. And the next phrase is usually something that says, â€œSo therefore, some white person must be losing out in the deal.â€

Whatâ€™s your response to those kinds of things?

COL A. Hester:

I donâ€™t think thatâ€™s true at all. I mean the key factor, for me, as far as the Armyâ€™s concerned, the militaryâ€™s concerned, is that the Army from top to bottom should represent the country. If you have a military thatâ€™s separate from its country or its population, be it ethnically, or even to the tune of on a sex basis, like with men and women, then at some point in time, youâ€™re going to have some real major problems, where you either have the Army not doing what the - particularly in the case of the United States - where the Army is not following the will of the politicians, or something worse than that. So youâ€™ve really got to have a military where all aspects of it are reflected in the society, and all aspects of society are reflected in the military.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

So I think itâ€™s great where you have a situation where youâ€™ve got minority Officers from top to bottom; minority Enlisted and Senior NCOs from top to bottom; and from all parts of the country, and all parts of the society. â€˜Cause I look at today, you know, and Iâ€™ll get off the soapbox in a second. When you have so few people that have nothing at all to do with whatâ€™s going on in Afghanistan, or what was going on in Iraq, except for what they see on the news, unless they are one of the few people in this country who have a son or a daughter or somebody involved.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And that is so strange to me, because even in Vietnam, there were a lot of communities involved. You couldnâ€™t - a lot of families were involved. A lot of people had money in the game.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And here, we donâ€™t have that now.

Interviewer:

Yeah; thatâ€™s -

COL A. Hester:

And thatâ€™s not good for us as a country.

Interviewer:

Yeah, it's interesting. I guess I'll let you end however you want, sir.

COL A. Hester:

Okay.

Interviewer:

Just any closing thoughts you'd like to offer.

COL A. Hester:

I've said this to a lot of different groups. I would - don't even want to spend a lot of time considering what my life would've been like if I hadn't gone to West Point. I have always been - I don't want to say intelligent, but I found studying easy. I could do things. When I was a kid, all my little buddies late in elementary school or high school called me, my nickname was "The Professor." So - because I knew all that stuff. So I think I would've done okay as a civilian student somewhere, but I would not have had the discipline or the dedication that I think I have now. And I owe that, you know, 90% of that to the fact that as a Cadet, you learn that stuff in spades, and you learn how to overcome obstacles.

Even when they're undesirable, you learn how to get around them. And that's something that you should learn in life, because there are going to be situations where you can't control those things.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL A. Hester:

And so I'm very appreciative of that. I like the idea that I was a Cadet. I like the idea that I am a soldier, and I'm very proud of that. So in spite of all some of the issues that we've talked about here -

Interviewer:

Yeah.

COL A. Hester:

I wouldn't do it any other way.

Interviewer:

Well sir, thank you very much for your time.

COL A. Hester:

Thank you.

Interviewer:

It's been a fascinating interview.

COL A. Hester:

Okay.

Interviewer:

And I've certainly learned a lot in the process, so.

COL A. Hester:

All right, very good.

Interviewer:

Thank you very much for your time.

COL A. Hester:

Okay.