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Transcript of the Interview with Laf Keaton



Nathan Stanley (Interviewer)-First of all could you give us your ethnic/racial back ground?

Laf Keaton-American. Nathan Hicks married a Cherokee maiden in 1740, and that's my mother's lineage: she's a Hicks. My great, great grandmother was Black on my mother's side. She had a son named David with Leonard Hicks, and he (David) married Louisa Parker, who was a Cherokee who had my grandfather John, who had my mother, Ida who had me. My mother married James **Keaton**, and his father was an Apache out of Arizona, and his father's mother was an Apache that married a soldier named Sergeant J.M. **Keaton**, and I believe that's where my father got his name. I was born in 29, October 1927.

NS-Could you give us a background on where you are from and how you came to serve in the Army?

LK-My father was career military. His father was career military, etc. My great grandfather was a military scout. So on my paternal side there is a military history. On my mother's side, my great grandfather fought in the Civil War on the side of the Confederacy. Indians did fight in the war. Either you were on the reservation . . . if you moved into society. . . . The Cherokee, tended to fit into society, or at least tried, until 1845 when Andrew Jackson ordered all of them to Oklahoma. It just happened that the Hicks avoided going, because when the troops came to move them off of their acreage, because we also owned a family barrial ground in South Carolina, the Indians who were there went down to the slave quarters and said the only ones down here were slaves. Anyway, they stayed in Cherokee, South Carolina, well lets see Charles Hicks who is the son of Nathan, was born into Georgia, there is a little section of Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina.

NS-So how did you come to serve in the Army and Korea?

LK-Originally I enlisted in 1946 in the Reserves. I wanted to find out what it was like before I put my feet into it. And, when I went to basic training, the drill sergreants said, "white troops over here, black troops over there, and what are you guys?" And they'd say Cuban or Mexican or whatever tribe, and I said, "we're misfits." He said, "Pick a side." I went on the white side. So my DD214 say's I'm American Indian and my medical records say I'm white. Because of the one drop of black blood rule, I'm African-American. I have no interest in Africa; because I was indoctrinated by my grandfather to the Indian perspective, I guess is the best way to put it.

NS-Where did you go to basic training?

LK-Fort Knox, Kentucky, and then I went back to Michigan where I was living and did some reserve time, until 1950 when the Korean War started. I requested the transfer to active duty and they said you have to enlist--it was before Korea, but things were going on that made me want to enlist. February 1950, I volunteered for the 511th, 11th Airborne Division. The 11th was in Japan, so they were near Korea and would go to Korea. Instead, the 11th came back to the states, and when I got out of jump school and went to Fort Cambell, Kentucky with the 11th Airborne Division, they put together, the 187th was a part of the 11th Division, and they put together a regimental combat team. It was a parachute infantry regiment and they wanted to reinforce regiment. They made it a combat team and sent it to Korea. And they sent me to the 8th Army Headquarters as a clerk with a Ranger unit. I ended up in the 187th.

NS-When you went into the 187th, how did you come into Korea? Was it on a combat jump?

LK-23 February 1951 they jumped into Korea. All the Rangers were deactivated just days before. We were all promoted. We were all sent to the 187th assigned to a company and we made the jump. Pretty quick. I always found it interesting. I know a lot of guys in the 187th. Frenchy Druin is the West Coast Airborne Association President. He was in the 187th when we showed up. He said he remebers me showing up, but I don't remember. There were a lot of things going on. We must have been pretty impressive. Nobody was supposed to know we were there. We were all classified behind the lines. The 187th were jumping behind the lines and it wasn't classified. They had a repoter from the Chicago Tribune that wrote about them jumping. Another thing I can tell you was that it was cold. Most miserable thing in your life is that it is so cold that you don't care whether you live or die. You get cold to the bone; it's hard to thaw out. Everybody complained about Vietnam being hot. You can deal with the heat a whole lot easier. There were a lot of casualties in Korea because of the weather. A lot of guys died. I never realized how many died from the 187th until I went back to the memorial at Fort Campbell where they have al the 187th troopers who have died in World War II, the Far East, Phillipenes, New Guinea, etc. And the number that died in Korea and the ones in Vietnam and all the other wars since Korea, Korea took up the mass of the death. There were a few in World War II and a few there after, and I never realized how many guys got killed and I was in the middle of that stuff. If you survived, you survived.

Dr. Jeffrey Barlow-Were you there when the war began?

LK-It began in June of 1950. When I got there I didn't get there with the 187th. I got there with the . . . 8th Army, in June after it started.

Dr. Barlow-You were there to jump behind enemy lines?

Laf Keaton-We were there to get behind enemy lines by whatever means possible, mostly jumping. See, that wasn't at the time it wasn't considered a combat jumb if you didn't jump a unit. In fact it wasn't unilt the 1980's jumps made by special teams were counted a combat jumps. In fact I recomended John Plaster's book *SOG* to Stanley. It tells about the time element when the jumps behind the lines became official.

NS-Could you talk a little about the racial atmosphere in Korea during the war?

LK-I was in a funny unit to start with. One, I was a different kind of person in a sence, and two, I was never in a segregated unit. When I was in the 8th Army Headquarters, the 2nd Ranger Company was all

black. And they knew me and I knew them, I knew 1st Ranger Company guys too, but they had an all black Ranger company. I thought this was interesting because you're going to stand out in the snow. But the racial thing with the airborne and with the Rangers was if you worked together, like if they integrated the teams, the 1st Ranger Co, and the 2nd Ranger Co. would do an operation together, you worked together as a team, because if you didn't you're dead. Life is simple when it gets down to life and death. In the paratroopers . . . you got to check your #7 cord on the back of your backpack before you jump, because if he breaks it, and you jump out of the plane, you're shute doesn't open. There is a different atmosphere, an attitude of cooperation.

Dr. Barlow-Do you know when they started integrating those teams?

LK-In 1948, President Truman put out an executive order to desegregate the military. Well the Triple Nickle at Fort Bragg, the 555, was an all black Airborne unit. During World War II the Pentagon refused to send them to Europe to fight the Germans. So they sent them to the West Coast to fight forest fires which is what the Triple Nicke did during World War II. At the same time the Tuskegee Airman trained and did go to Europe as fighter pilots in World War II. Another thing about this racial issue I got to point out is most folks skip it, ignore it, or don't talk about it. But because of one of the Tuskegee Airman went to Tuskegee to become a pilot, his brother went to the Air Force--not the Air Force at the time but the Army Air Corps school--to be a pilot. Now he happened to have that drop of Black blood, his hair happened to be straight or wavy, fair skinned and he just happened to be listed as white and he went to Europe in a regular unit. There were a lot . . . one was classified as African-American in all the units, including the 11th and the 187th, that had been accepted as Hispanic, Italian, thought of as white. The integration was already there, so when they started bringing the Black troops out of the Triple Nickle, to go to Korea, we all knew what was going on. Its like you got all these people up here who adhere to the rules, and nobody can break the rules. And we're sitting here knowing the rules are already broken. You don't say anything; and silence is a very effective weapon. So, the first leg units were black units. They called in a lot of reserve units; I have to bring that up too. A lot of reserve units went into Korea.

Dr. Barlow-Did you see the 24th in Korea?

KS-Uh, he got attached to a lot of units. I know we got attached to the 2nd Division. In fact the whole regiment didn't get attached. A battalion or company would get attached, and I do know that the 2nd Division put out a lot of orders stating we belonged to them. We burned the orders after the fact. The 24th? We worked with the 1st marine Division, so its possible that we worked with them. Anybody that got up north, we were working with them. We stayed in North Korea. We jumped into North Korea. We fought in North Korea.

NS-Did you see any acts from officers or enlisted men that you would think were racist?

LK-Yes, but see again you'd have to talk to Grant Hauskins. He was in Korea. He was a Sergeant [with] an impeccable background which makes it even more interesting. Had been in the Army Security Agency, and was the first known black to be in the Army Security Agency. Paratrooper, he had quite a record. He had been an MP in Germany during 1945 when he was 15, said he was 18 and got away with it because they really didn't check back then. He got passed over for a promotion and felt that it was racially based, that the company commander wanted the stripe to go to one of the White soldiers. My attitude was shrug it off and keep on truckin'.

NS-Did you see anything else like that? In regards to the all black Rangers, did you ever see anything unfair dealt to them?

LK-No, they were no different. They were poor too. The only thing on a personal basis is, "the only Indian is a dead Indian," and when I went to leadership academy I had so many points ahead of everyone else for Honor Graduate, everyone knew I had it. And the Commendant called me in at the end and asked if I would mind sharing honor graduate with the person in second place, because I had so much experience, and he wanted to further this soldier's career. And I just shrugged and said it was no big deal. It was probably the only Honor Graduate that was shared at graduation.

Dr. Barlow-And you think it was because the other guy was white?

LK-Yep. But you know, to me its not that important My grandfather walked off the reservation, before he went into the Army. But he went to Pheonix to get a job, and they didn't hire Indians. But they did have a couple of blacks working for them. He went back to the reservation, and he told them he was no longer Indian. They were like what do you mean? He said from now on I'm colored. He went back and got a job. They wouldn't hire Indians so they'd hire you if you were colored. He was the same person; he looked like an Indian. The attitude is its their problem I guess life is how you perceive it. And my grandfather told me when I was quite young that life is a war that everyone loses. So you have to enjoy the scirmishes, and you have to enjoy the battles on your way to losing the war. And it took me quite a few years to understand that he was saying life isn't easy: in the first place you're going to die in the long run, so you better enjoy all the problems you have. There are people who told me in situations in a lot of times in different places where everybody thought it was pretty bad, and I say hey it'll be a better day tommorrow or we'll have lost the war. If you survive untl tomorrow, you've won the battle. So, you smile and go home.

NS-Let me clarify what you have said. You said that in the 187th it was pretty clear that most people were treated equally because if you didn't do your job-

LK--You depended on each other.

NS-Is that I fair summary.

LK-Well let me take that back, because the 187th was a regiment that was part of the 11th Airborne Division. The 11th Airborne Division was under General McArthur during World War II. General McArthur's attitude was that we're in a war . . . to win [and] the enemy is the [Koreans]. Every American that fights for me is a soldier. I remember him saying that we don't have any racism in my units. Every soldier's color is green and every soldier's rank is on his color or his sleeve. And that's the soldier's first name. I got the name of the Japanese paratroopers in the 11th Airborne Division right in front of me. They were Nisei, second generation Americans, whose parents had been put in the Relocation Camps here in American. We got Dale Yee here, who was Chinese, who jumped into Las Bonios, actually it was B Co. with the 11th Airborne Division jumped in and rescued 2,147 civilian internees from behind Japanese lines--the best kept secret in World War II-- without a casualty. And I enlisted in B Co. 511, and never got into, and everybody knew it. Joe "Spider" Lee was Chinese in the 11th Airborne Division in World War II. Abe Takara, George Ito, Robert Kamura, Norman Kikuta, Larry Kiupa, Tex Kuga, etc, etc, etc. We had a second generation Colonel. There were a lot of Hispanics. Racism was alive and well, but depending on the attitude of their commanders. . .

Dr. Barlow-Speaking of that point, in Korea, I understand the 24th was accused of breaking in front of the Koreans or Chinese, and they later said that it was because they were badly led, that their officers were comtemptuous . . . that their officers were racist. Have you heard that story?

LK-I have heard the story, and I have never known anybody who was there to give me their story of what happened. And like most stories you take it with a grain of salt. . . . I wrote a poem, I wished I had

brought it with me, because I talked about the mass when the Chinese came across, and they would just come at you with a mass of people, and you'd just stack bodies up in front of you, and the next wave would come. Tootutudodo, they'd blow their bugels, making noise, and you'd just kill them and they'd just keep coming. It was just . . . like fighting ants and they were endless. Nightmare Alley: the sun would come up and they'd come up with the sun. They been out there with the snow all night, but they sneak up at you, and at dawn they come at you. There were a lot of units that got overrun. It all boils down to McArthur and he used the paratroopers for what they were designed for.

JB-So you are saying that leadership was a major issue?

LK-Leadership is always a major issue.

JB-A racist leader could have done a lot of damage?

LK-Yes.

NS-Could you just compare the racial atmosphere of the military in Korea to that of the United States at the time you left or came back?

LK-That's a good question, because of the racial lines. The best example is going to Fort Benning from Fort Bragg. We got on a bus. On the way we stopped at a restaurant--this was in early 1950. And the restaurant said that the black troops had to get their food on the bus. The Major who was in charge of the group, said fix lunches for all the troops and we'll eat on the bus. I think we stopped in Georgia. They wouldn't allow any blacks in the restaurant. They had a window around back where the blacks would go to get their food. And sitting in the back of the bus, and all of the other things that were going on, that was taking place. But as a soldier, if you stayed on post the military community itself is contained, and if you're going somewhere it is from point A to point B. The biggest problem traveling is if you have POV (privately owned vehicle), then in the deep South it could get scary. The third time I came back from Korea, I was going to go pick up my POV in New Orleans which is an interesting place. I picked up the car and I was driving through Louisiana, stopped at a restaurant, parked and went in. The waitress looked at me, went over to the manager, came back looked at me again, looked at the car, which had Japanese license plates. The manager came over and looked at me and then looked at the car and then said, "It's alright, he's Japanese." And they fed me, and I knew I didn't look like a Japanese. I was awful big to be a Japanese. But I didn't even think about it when I walked in there because I had spent so much time in the Far East that I just nonchalantly walked in in my uniform.

JB-So it was a lot better in Asia?

LK-Well, in Asia you go to town you go to a restaurant. The Japanese were very racist themselves, but only if you were Japanese and Hindu, or Japanese and caucasian. You were discriminated against. And the way we really found that out, the 11th Airborne Division set up an orphanage after World War II for the children of American soldiers, mixed children. These kids in Japan had a real tough time. In a sense it was (better) to me in America because if you were an Indian and you were dead, okay you were alright. So you avoided being killed. If you are black you avoid certain things. That subtle racism is harder to deal with.

JB-Could you just quickly just tell us what the racial situation in Vietnam was like?

LK-Vietnam came with a totally integrated Army, so let's focus in on how the racism worked. The racism again came down from the leaders; but now if you were in the type of unit I was in, the reason

you didn't have apparant racism was that you had teams, three man team, 1-0, 1-1, 1-2. 1-0 regardless of his rank was in charge of the team. It didn't make any difference what the rank was or what the race was.

JB-Im sorry I don't know what these teams are, were you a Green Beret?

LK-Yes, that's what this is (points to emblem on his hat).

JB-I've never seen a black one before.

LK-Well this is a Ranger Beret, this (pointing to pin) is SOG, special operations association.

JB-Were you on an "A" Team?

LK-We weren't called "A" Team. We weren't there. We didn't exist. They had the 5th Special Forces in Vietnam. The 5th Special Forces was our cover unit. I can take my personal order. I was stationed in Okinawa with the 1st Special Forces Group. I got orders that said I was going on temporary duty to Saigon; it was the the most general order you ever saw, in terms of saying nothing. It says I'll be there for 150 days, [and] I can carry civilian clothes. I think they said I could have a personal weapon. I could make parachuters jumps with a foreign government, but it didn't say anything. Right along with that, before I went to Okinawa, I had to sign a statement that said I would say nothing about what I did on penalty of--it didn't say death, but they meant it. We weren't there. The teams were integrated and we didn't think about race because what we were into was so bad. We were brothers or you didn't survive.

JB-What does bravery mean to you?

LK-Bravery is being willing to face death for something you beleive in.

JB-What was it that you believed in?

LK-The Constitution of the United States. If it wasn't for the Constitution my whole family could have served and I wouldn't have spent a second. It's the Constitution. If you read it, we don't have rulers. The people decide. That means that everyone in America should be safe from an oppresive government. I was willing to follow the orders of that government for the sake of the Country, and I think that comes again from my parentage which said you have to be willing to fight for your land and your people.

JB-So you trace that back to your Indian side?

LK-Yeah.

JB-At this time when there was so much alienation with those who had black blood, how could you have kept the same level of commitment to the Constitution? Is it your professionalism?

LK-Yes, for me it was. But there were a lot of African-Americans who were over there and did a good job and some who died, because they believed in what the country had to offer: that America, regardless of its problems, is still the best country in the world.

Return to the [Korean War Homepage](#)

