

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Program Director: Dr. Paul Ortiz



241 Pugh Hall
PO Box 115215
Gainesville, FL 32611
(352) 392-7168
<https://oral.history.ufl.edu>

AAHP 357 Sollie Mitchell
African American History Project (AAHP)
Interviewed by Jasmine Reynolds on September 26, 2014
41 minutes | 15 pages

Abstract: In this interview Mitchell talks about his time in the military during WWII. He talks about how he worked in the general's office before going off to East Asia. Then he speaks about how he was in an all-black company that supplied ammunition to others. He also touches on the things the soldiers did in their free time and how it was during and after combat. Lastly he touches on what he did after the military and some tips for people thinking about joining.

Keywords: [Army; WWII; Fort Benning; Aberdeen Proving Ground; The Philippines; Japan; Jacksonville; New York; Ocilla, Georgia; Florida Memorial College; The invasion of Cebu City; Zamboanga; New Guinea; Lahti]

Standards:

SS.912.A.1.3 Utilize timelines to identify the time sequence of historical data.

SS.912.A.1.7 Describe various socio-cultural aspects of American life including arts, artifacts, literature, education, and publications.

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
PROGRAM
University of Florida

AAHP 357

Interviewee: Sollie Mitchell

Interviewer: Jasmine Reynolds

Date: September 26, 2014

R: This is Jasmine Reynolds with the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program and I am in Jacksonville, Florida with Mr. Sollie Mitchell. And let's start with where and when you were born.

M: I was born June the 20th, 1918.

R: And where was the location?

M: Ocilla, Georgia: O-C-I-L-L-A.

R: And what were you doing before you entered the military?

M: I was in school. I was at Florida Memorial College and I was the first student to be drafted for World War II from Florida Memorial College. It was stationed in St. Augustine at the time.

R: Okay. You were drafted or you enlisted?

M: No, [Laughter] I was drafted.

R: They just picked only you from that college or more?

M: Well all the male youths that were there that was eighteen and above had to register. That was in 1940, so the summer of 1941 I was the first student drafted for World War II.

R: Okay, all right, and where did you go for training camp?

M: I went to Fort Benning—I didn't train. What happened was that I went to Fort Benning and one of the soldiers that worked in the general's office knew me so he told the general that I was able to type so they pulled me out. And I worked in the general's office at Fort Benning before training. I didn't train, I just went right onto work.

R: So you were stationed at Fort Benning?

M: Fort Benning. I stayed there three years, and then when I left Fort Benning I went to Aberdeen Proving Ground and there I trained for three months, I believe, and while I was there, I was stationed there and I was an instructor in ammunition and guns to the troops who came in there.

R: So did you get to put the guns together?

M: Yeah put the guns together—and all about guns.

R: Do you remember what kind of guns you put together?

M: At that time we used the automatic rifle and a carbine came into existence at that time, Springfield rifle—they didn't have all of the modern guns that they have now. They had the Springfield rifle, they had the carbine, they had the 105 Howitzer and the 155 Howitzer. Those are the guns that we trained them in. The velocity of shells and all about the ammunition and whatnots, you know, and if it was armor piercing. We trained them about what to do. We also trained them in the use of amphibious equipment, like they call it a duck; it was a piece of equipment that could run on land and also in the ocean. So we trained the soldiers on that, how to go into the water and come back to land.

R: Was that the only job you did with the guns?

M: I had the guns and the equipment and I also trained them in clerical work. In clerical work, the army records and whatnot? We also trained them in that.

R: What was your highest rank that you got while you were in the Army?

M: I was a staff sergeant. That was the first three grades of non-commissioned officers. I was a staff sergeant; that was three stripes up and one stripe down.

R: Did you see any combat?

M: Yes, I was on the invasion of Cebu City in [19]45. I was on the invasion of Cebu, I was actually in combat in the Philippines. I was in New Guinea, I was in Lahti, and I was on the invasion of Cebu City and Zamboanga. I was in those places stationed in actual combat.

R: Were you along the front lines getting heavy fire?

M: Oh, yeah. We were fired upon Easter Sunday 1945. They bombed my company. See, I was in ordnance ammunition which was very important to the enemy. We were one of the hot units, so they fired upon us. And they bombed the dump where we were, but what happened when they bombed it, didn't any of us get hurt because when dropped the bomb, it fell in the heavy equipment and the explosion went up. By us being right at the dump it didn't bother us, but soldiers that were away when the shrapnel came down, some of them was injured. We were fortunate enough not to lose a man because we ran to our foxholes and other duties that they had to do.

R: Were there a lot of African Americans in your troop?

M: Well my company was only African Americans. The only Caucasian was the commanding officer. I was in the Eighth Army under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur, but my duties were in the office. I was a clerk. I was the company clerk of the 578th Ordnance Outfit. So I kept a record of the duties of the soldiers, so I didn't actually do daily combat. I did office work after we secured the island. What I did was kept a record of the soldiers and gave a report each day.

R: Was there a time where you experienced racism while you were there?

M: Well, racism?

R: Yeah, like did somebody try to do something to you because you were Black?

M: No, no, no, because see I tell you what: we were an all-Black company so therefore we didn't encounter racists. And MacArthur's headquarters was all White, but I was the only clerk there because we were the first company to go into the Philippines with him. We were the first Black company and then the other companies came in later. But as far as racism, we were Black, it wasn't mixed so therefore—

R: You were separated.

M: Yeah, we were separated.

R: Were you married at the time?

M: No, I didn't marry until after I came out of the army. I didn't wanna marry while I was a soldier because my thing was, I didn't know what would happen to me, and I didn't wanna marry a girl and—she have a wounded soldier. So my aunt was my beneficiary, but I stayed in the army four years, four months and twenty days and wasn't injured in any way while I was there. I was overseas. I landed in New Guinea, went from New Guinea to Lahti, and from Lahti on the invasion of Cebu. And then after that I was listed and at sea when they dropped the atomic bomb. My company was on its way to Japan for the big thing, but what happened—the atom bomb was dropped so therefore we went in there, it was peace. We went in there the ninth of September 1945. We went on in, we landed in Tokyo and what we did, our duties—my company was the company who went

in to—test the ammunition that the Japanese had. So what we did, we went in and worked with ammunition. We dumped ammunition at sea and whatnot.

R: Did you write home to any family members while you were there?

M: Well, to my aunt. I wrote to her, and I don't think I wrote girlfriends or anything like that. I just wrote my aunt and kept her aware of where I was.

R: Did you receive any special medals?

M: Yeah, I received several medals, but I'll have to get the receipt to remember. I don't remember, but I received the bronze star. I know I received a bronze star and I received a medal for being overseas. But I received the bronze star for the actual battle of the Philippines.

R: Where were you on the day of Pearl Harbor?

M: I was home on a three-day pass; I was stationed at Fort Benning so that was my first furlough. I was home on a three-day pass when they bombed Pearl Harbor, because, see, I went in the army in August and Pearl Harbor was December. So therefore at that time I was stationed at that time at Fort Benning, Georgia. I worked in the general's office. Well, actually I was the caretaker of the general when I was stationed at Fort Benning: anything, like he wanted to go to a parade, we had a motorcycle with a sidecar so I would ride the motorcycle and take him to the parades, I'd take him to inspections and things like that while at Fort Benning.

R: When you came back from being in the war, how did you adjust to being back home?

M: Well when I came back from Japan I immediately applied for a job. I applied for the post office and then I applied for the railroad. And I took a post office exam, but when I applied for the railroad, they hired me right on the spot, and that was in 1946. I became a Pullman porter in 1946, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was my thing and I was secretary-treasurer of the local Brotherhood group in Jacksonville for six years. And Mr. Randolph and my family was friends while growing up. My mother and A. Philip Randolph were classmates together; they went to Cookman's Academy on Davis Street. But he was from Crescent City, but his father and my grandfather were good friends and they both were ministers. But my grandfather was a presiding [inaudible 16:15] and Randolph's father was a regular pastor, so therefore he came to Jacksonville because Crescent City didn't give him—so he came here and he organized New Hope A.M.E. Church that's on Davis Street now, Randolph's daddy did. And they lived out east, and my mother lived out east on Union Street; so they went to Cookman Institute on Davis Street as young people. When he graduated, he was valedictorian of the graduating class; he went to New York, and she remained here and went to school at A & M and she also was a graduate of Hampton University. She got a B.S. from A & M and a master's from Hampton University. I think she was the first teacher in Jacksonville to receive a master's in elementary education. Ms. E.G. Barnett.

R: Okay—have you remained in contact with anybody that was in your company?

M: Well, no, in my company for a while most of the men that were in my company, they were from Chicago, Texas and New York. So I didn't communicate with

them much, but the group from Fort Benning, we remained in touch until all of us kind of half passed away. There were a few fellows from Jacksonville and we were organized—**Alexander Cottrell**, he was at Fort Benning. We stayed together until he passed and most of the other fellows we had a **Benning-ite** group and the only ones that I know now that were at Fort Benning, not when I was actually there, but they became members is James **Burroughs**, and— Captain—I can't call his name right now, but we all stayed together. It'll come up to me in a few minutes about the other fellow.

R: Did you know of anyone that was a prisoner of war?

M: No, we didn't have any prisoners; there weren't any in my company that were prisoners of war. They didn't take any. But our company stayed in contact as long as I was with them overseas, so I don't know what happened because, see, I came back to the states in [19]45. The last of [19]45 I came back. But there weren't anyone in my company who became a prisoner of war; we all were separated and we didn't lose any member during the actual fighting. We didn't lose any members because the night that we were attacked wasn't any of us—we didn't lose anyone. But we participated in the firing of the enemy. I even handled a thirty-caliber myself. [Laughter]

R: How was that for you?

M: Huh?

R: How was that handling that gun?

M: It was just like what you had to do, what you had to do. What happened the night when we were attacked, the fellow that was on the machine gun when I was in

the foxhole with he became—he ran. He got up. I don't know what happened to him, but I don't think he got killed or got shot or anything. So therefore I took his position on a thirty-caliber machine gun until it wouldn't fire no more. [Laughter]

R: So you weren't afraid to step up and just—

M: No, no, it was just like, hey, just like what you had to do, what you had to do.

R: What about during the like downtimes? Did you guys engage in any games or anything?

M: Oh, yeah. Some of the fellows, we had some of the fellows that participated in—it was baseball I think it was, but I didn't participate in any of the games or anything like that. But I would go; our recreation department would see wrestling, baseball games, but there were no football. What happened is that—but we had a baseball team on the campus, we had it. It was my task to set up baseball grounds. So what happened is that one of the fellow [inaudible 22:53] was knowledgeable in games, so he's the one who was able to do all of the dimensions because I didn't know anything about it. But he was able to. So we organized the team and we called it the **Dorian Miller Park**; so they played baseball and all that. I didn't participate in any of the sports of that kind.

R: What about the food there? Was it good?

M: Well, the food was good. We had good chefs. They fixed nice wholesome food and they gave you as much as you wanted. And well, by me being in the first three grades they took good care of me; I had good food. Everything was good, our quarters were good, but I had a separate room. The barracks was so many soldiers, they had beds, but I had a private room.

R: Was that because of your rank?

M: Rank—mmhm. I was the first three grades.

R: Since you saw combat, how did you feel seeing people die from the war?

M: Well, my experience was that the next morning, when you see a dead soldier, no problem. I mean, it didn't affect you that much at that time because you saw dead soldiers and it was terrible. But it didn't affect me because I wasn't out there every day with the actual combat because I took care of the office. That only affected me the morning after the attack. You saw dead soldiers, some of them were Japanese; most of them was Japanese. I ain't see any Americans. It was Japanese soldiers that had gotten killed the night before.

R: Did you see more wounded soldiers since you were on the inside?

M: Well I didn't see many wounded soldiers because I was in the office behind, but we didn't have any wounded soldiers in my company. We were fortunate. We didn't have—the wounded was those that was up on the front line. See, my company was the one who supplied ammunition for the ones that were fighting. So my job was, get the ammunition to the infantry group so they could fight for us.

R: Trying to think of a question now. [Laughter] When you returned home, did you think any different about the war in general before you enlisted?

M: No, when I came home—I didn't think anything. They wanted me to come back, but I wouldn't. I was able to get a job on the railroad thirty days after I came home so I had good job. No, no, no! I didn't wanna go back to war.

R: Are you involved in any veteran organizations?

M: Yeah, I belong to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and I belong to the **V.A.** over here on Benedict Road, but I haven't attended any V.A. meetings I'm just a member—I mean I'm a Veteran of Foreign Wars and then I'm a veteran. So but they've exempted me from coming to meetings at my age; they come and get me. See I'm ninety-six; I don't get around good like they do.

R: During the war did you ever see or was there a lot of soldiers getting sick?

M: Sick?

R: Yeah, were they getting sick?

M: Well, my company, we didn't have much sickness or anything like that. So when one got sick, they would take care of them in the dispensary. But we didn't have much sickness in my company when I was overseas. But when I was in the United States, I worked in the general office so I didn't have anything to do with the actual company report. It was only when I went overseas, and we didn't have much sickness there. They all seemed to be in pretty good health. No one was wounded, so therefore we didn't have to bother with that.

R: You stayed in the army all the way until the war ended?

M: Yeah, I was in there from the beginning to the end. I was in there when the war started and I was in there when the war ended. The war ended in [19]45 and I was drafted in [19]41. And from [19]41 to [19]45, see, they dropped the atomic bomb in [19]45 so that ended the war, but when I went in, they weren't fighting. So they start the fighting after Pearl Harbor, so I got caught up in that.

R: How long were you in training camp?

M: Well, I was only in training camp about three months, I believe, and that was when I went to Aberdeen Proving Ground because at Fort Benning I didn't train because I was in the office. I didn't train. I didn't have to go to the firing ranges and all the things like that at Fort Benning, I only went to the firing range when I went to Aberdeen Proving Ground. But when I went to Aberdeen Proving Ground, I had to get out, actually go to camp, go in the woods, and go to the firing range, and train with guns and things like that. I only did that at Aberdeen Proving Ground.

R: Did you prefer working in the office?

M: Well, yes, [Laughter] because I didn't have to get up. I didn't have to make reveille or things like that because of my position.

R: What was reveille?

M: That's fellows had to get up in the morning and be counted for; reveille was, they would take a record of every morning who was there, and if they were sick or anything like that, and if they were still on campus they went away. Unauthorized to be away. So that's what that was about.

R: Would they get in trouble?

M: You'd get in trouble if they weren't there. See, the company sergeant would keep a report of who was there and the condition of the soldiers. See, I didn't have to do that. I was in headquarters.

R: Did anyone ever sneak away that you know of?

M: I'm not sure because I wasn't in that department. And while at Benning, I didn't have to send a record to the headquarters. But when I was in the Philippines, I

had to get a report from the first sergeant and take that report to the headquarters, like anyone sick, how many sick, anyone absent and things like that. But I was there just after the war and we were pretty well organized. We didn't have any fellows to go A.W.O.L. which means that they weren't present. They were always intact and had a good company, but I left Japan in December of 1945 I didn't stay over there. I stayed over there from September to December and then I had enough points to come home. My deal was to come home.

R: How long were you in the Philippines?

M: I was in the Philippines, I was in there all of [19]45 up until I went to Japan. I went over there in January of 1945 and I stayed there until—I was on my way to Japan when they dropped the atomic bomb. I was at sea when they dropped the atomic bomb.

R: How was it in the Philippines?

M: Well, the Philippines were nice. We didn't have any trouble. The fellows had good leaves and we didn't have any who ran away or anything like that; so we had good duty in the Philippines. And the soldiers got along with the Filipinos, and they were very nice and friendly and they were good to us.

R: Did you receive any other specialized training as far as putting the guns together?

M: No, no, no. Oh, yeah, I went to Army General Classification School; I went to school and I graduated from Army General Classification School, which meant that we were there studying the method of keeping good records and that was the essence of that training. So I finished that.

R: Did you have any siblings here in the U.S. while you in the war?

M: No, I wasn't married so I didn't have any children and then I got out in [19]46 and I didn't marry until [19]51. I was out about five or six years before I got married.

R: So it was just your aunt that you stayed in contact with?

M: Oh yeah, well, I lived with my uncle and aunt, but when I got a job with the railroad, they sent me to New York. So I stayed in New York up until 1969. In 1969, I came back to Jacksonville. The railroad transferred me back to Jacksonville, but when I was a Pullman porter, immediately they sent me back to New York and I stayed in New York. And when they began to downsize the Pullman Company, I got a job with the railroad. So I got hired as soon as I went to them. The railroad hired me because I was already a railroad man; didn't lose no time in my work. I just went from a Pullman porter to a chair cart attendant with the Atlantic Coastline Railroad.

R: How did being in the military help you with your job on the railroad?

M: It was good because when I was in the military, I was stationed at Fort Benning, and from Fort Benning we sent troops all over the country. So what happened, when they would send a trainload of recruits from Benning to camps everywhere, they would send me along as a car commander. That's what they called us. We take care of the troops on the way to be sure that when the train stop, that you keep a record of the soldiers whether any got off or got left or anything like that. So that helped me get a job on the railroad.

R: What advice would you give to someone in the military?

M: In the military? Well, the military is a good training ground for young men. It is like going to college. You go there and take a military course, it's just like a college course: you get good training in the military. I advise these young fellows to volunteer and join the military because there you get good training, and it's meaningful training that you can use once you get out of the service. Because while I was in there, I was able to take training that helped me on the railroad. Helped me on the railroad, on the trains, and then also helped me when I was promoted to the general office, because back then we had key punch which eventually turned into computer. But I was able to learn key punching and then key punching went into computer. I got a very small amount of training in computer because I retired in [19]81, but that's when the computer was introduced into railroad then. They was using key punch and then the beginning of the [19]80s, they went over to computer. But at that time it was key punch.

R: All right. I have one last question: is there anything that you feel like we haven't discussed that you would like to talk about?

M: Well we've talked about look like everything that I know. [Laughter] Well, I enjoyed talking with you—

R: You, too. Thank you so much.

M: Hope that I was able to give you something. [Laughter]

[End of Interview]

Transcribed by: Jasmine Reynolds, December 5, 2014

Audit-edited by: Jessica Taylor, December 5, 2014

Final edit by: Ryan Morini, February 25, 2019