Chapter IX

NEGRO FLIERS

In 1939 the Civilian Pilot Training Program opened the field of aviation to the Negro. In the 36 years which had passed since Kitty Hawk, individual blacks had learned to fly, but in common with all pioneer pilots, except those in the services, they logged their hours the hard way, and when certificated, found no welcome in the career field. The hope was that now they might.

For example, in 1928, Mr. Charles Alfred Anderson of Bryn Mawr, Pa., bought an airplane for $3,000 and took instruction at an airport near his home, paying $10.00 an hour for his flying time. Four years later, in 1932, he acquired his commercial pilot's certificate—undoubtedly the first of his race to do so, although there is no official record—and he estimated that the small piece of paper had cost him more than $6,000. (This included the price of a second airplane).

In 1932, of course, aviation was probably at the lowest ebb in its existence and the picture was bleak indeed—no jobs and no future for anybody—let alone an ambitious young Negro. However, Mr. Anderson managed to stay with it and by 1939 he was in business. He and a partner were operating a Piper Cub mounted on floats from a seaplane base at the foot of Second Street, S.W. and the Potomac River in Washington, D.C., and a WACO cabin plane from Beacon Field in nearby Virginia, when the CFTP was announced. Later he was able to put his knowledge and experience to good use helping to get the Program started at Howard University and became a flight instructor there. Mr. Anderson has continued to stay with aviation and today is one of the Regional Directors of Negro Airmen International, an organization of professional fliers.

Howard was one of the six Negro colleges which took an active part in the CFTP. The others were:

- Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Ala.
- Delaware State College, Dover, Del.
- Hampton Institute, Hampton, Va.
- North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Greensboro, N.C.
- West Virginia State College, Institute, W. Va.

There was a scattering of Negroes in many other schools throughout the country and two Negro non-college units in the Chicago area, one of them

---

*In 1999, according to the Bureau of the Census, eight Negro pilots held Commercial ratings.

*Out of a class of 50 at the University of Minnesota, the first student to solo was a Negro. At Joliet, Ill., in a non-college unit, the student to make the highest grade was a Negro, Earl Franklin.
operated by a young woman, Miss Willa Brown. This was the Coffey School of Aeronautics, located at the Harlem Airport, Oak Lawn, Illinois, named for Miss Brown’s husband, Cornelius Coffey, one of the nation’s earliest certificated flight instructors who, additionally, held the airplane and engine mechanic’s certificate. The Coffey School offered the full range of CPTP and War Training Service courses, and was the hub of Negro Civil Air Patrol activity after that program was conceived in 1941.

![Photo courtesy Edward A. Gileson](image)

Miss Willa Brown and some of her students, Miss Brown owned and operated the Coffey School of Aeronautics and carried out the full range of CPTP and War Training Service courses.

Tuskegee Institute, largest of the group, became one of the CAA’s most important contractors. In the early days of the Program when 400 colleges were offering primary flying, advanced work was restricted to some 60 Centers, most of them long established in the business. Though a late comer on the horizon, Tuskegee was given Center status in 1940, and was one of the few educational institutions to provide flight as well as ground instruction at that time.

By 1941 the Institute had five flight instructors, one of them the aforementioned Charles Alfred Anderson, who was recruited by CAA and sent to Chicago in the summer of 1940 to qualify for the secondary rating. That summer the Institute had a total of 12 airplanes—eight Piper Cubs for the elementary classes and four WACOs for the advanced. The next year, Stinson, Howard, and Piper cabin aircraft were added for the commercial pilot courses.

After a year and a half the primary classes were enlarged from 15 students each to three annual groups of 30. With one exception the secondary quota began and remained at 10 students per session; spring, summer, and fall. This quota was much too small and operated to the disadvantage of the CPTP’ers, many of whom were drafted by the Army before an opening was available in the advance of the Air Force when large secondary were needed.

The one exception was that time the Army planned exclusively for Negroes, to be used for cadet material, and pilots. The 30 men chosen represented the Institute, West Virginia University College and from physical examinations being the same for all.

Before this class was finished and plans were announced Institute, the candidates to this secondary course of instruction at 30 special students was in command, and so as out they were all drawn, the first all Negro course.

Ironically, Tuskegee also there was no airport within. Dr. Fred L. Park and George L. Washington, we the opportunity to fly became a reality, Mr. Washington with such force and logic, the Institute was approved for the May months in early 1940, the CAA, even though it took much more expensive for everybody, of no return, through the months and Washington, a lease was the campus. This was known

From the very beginning that the Institute should keep working toward that end. doing, and is a story in the needed funds, but the Kennedy acreage won own hard—labor—they held markers, lay out runways, hearted cooperation of the adequate flying field.

As soon as possible the transferred to the new sitio certificates and were happy
This was the Coffeyport, Oak Lawn, Illinois, a city, one of the nation's key points, held the airplane and offered the full range of the hub of Negro Gravel in 1941.

was available in the advanced groups. This also proved to the disadvantage of the Air Force when larger numbers of cadets who had completed CAA secondary were needed.

The one exception was a special class of 30 convened in early 1941. At that time the Army planned, rather than set up a primary flying school exclusively for Negroes, to draw upon Tuskegee's CAA secondary graduates for cadet material, and provided the Institute with aircraft for this purpose. The 30 men chosen represented a cross-section of students from Hampton Institute, West Virginia State College, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College and from Howard University as well as Tuskegee. Their physical examinations were given at Maxwell Field, Alabama, requirements being the same as for all aviation cadets.

Before this class was finished, however, the Air Force changed its mind and plans were announced to establish a military flight program at Tuskegee Institute, the candidates to be selected from men who had completed CTP's secondary course of instruction. For some reason, however, only one of the 30 special students was included in the original class, but before the year was out they were all drawn in and became part of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, the first all Negro combat unit.

Ironically, Tuskegee almost didn't get into the Program at first because there was no airport within the requisite 10 miles. However, the Institute's President, Dr. Fred L. Patterson, and the Director of Mechanical Industries, George L. Washington, were resolved that their students should not be denied the opportunity to fly because of this technicality. With characteristic determination, Mr. Washington traveled to Washington and presented his case with such force and logic, that an exception was made and on October 15, 1939, Mr. Hickley notified Dr. Patterson that Tuskegee's flight training was approved for the Montgomery Airport, 40 miles away. For several months in early 1940, the trainees made the 40-mile trip almost every day, even though it took too much time from their other studies and was far too expensive for everybody. However, by March 1, at what seemed the point of no return, through the "never say quit" attitudes of Messrs. Patterson and Washington, a base was secured on a tract of land about five miles from the campus. This was known as Kennedy Field.

From the very beginning those two gentlemen had made up their minds that the Institute should have an airport closer to its own grounds and began working toward that end. (Eventually they were successful, but it took some doing, and is a story in itself.) They started an alumni drive to raise the needed funds, but the money—$5,000—went toward the improvement of the Kennedy aeroage which, between the alumni contributions, the students’ own hard labor—they helped clear brush, cut down trees, fill holes, put up markers, lay out runways and build a two-plane hangar—and the whole-hearted cooperation of the CAA's Atlanta office, was finally made into an adequate flying field.

As soon as possible thereafter the commuting ended. Operations were transferred to the new site and in May the first class received their private certificates and were happily flying. However, the size of the Tuskegee program increased so rapidly that for a while secondary students had to use...
a field at Alabama Polytechnical Institute at Auburn, Ala., 20 miles away, driving back and forth in a station wagon. This was almost as unsatisfactory as the Montgomery arrangement but there was no alternative until Kennedy underwent further enlargement and all CAA training could carry on from that point.

Eventually Tuskegee was to operate three airports. The elementary field, Kennedy, which became known as No. 1, and was referred to frequently as the "mother field." Airport No 2, about four miles away, built with money borrowed by the Institute from the Julius Rosenwald Fund through the help of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt who was a member of the Board of Trustees. This was restricted to Army primary training of all Negro cadets under a contract with the War Department which stipulated that Tuskegee would provide instructors, aircraft and other facilities.

Airport No. 3 was all-military, built with appropriated funds and officially designated the Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF). Here it was that the new young pilots learned combat techniques and received their wings and commissions.

Tuskegee Institute participated in all the CAA-sponsored pilot training courses, beginning with the first CPTP session in 1939-40 until that Program's termination after Pearl Harbor, and on through the War Training Service which succeeded it and came to an end in late 1944.

Institute authorities estimate that about 400 students successfully completed CAA elementary, secondary, instructor, cross-country, instrument and flight officer courses; that under CAA War Training approximately 500 enlisted student reservists were given ten (10) hours of dual flight indoctrination in light aircraft, and that 2,111 aviation cadets from all sources were sent to the Army Primary Flying School at Airport No. 2. All of this was carried on under contracts with the Civil Aeronautics Administration and the War Department.

In its initial course, the Institute set a record in the Southeast by passing 20 out of 20 students in ground school, all with exceptionally high grades, and then sending the same 20 through the flight tests to receive their private pilot certificates. Two of these were girls, Miss Mildred Hansen and Miss Mildred Hennings, both residents of Tuskegee.

The excellent records made by these students on the written examination were attributed by the CAA to the strong teaching staff under the direction of Mr. Washington. Two of his students scored among the highest grades achieved in the entire 1939-1940 group of 10,000 in Civil Air Regulations, Meteorology and Navigation. They were Alexander Anderson, who scored 100 on the CARs and 92 in the remaining subjects, and Charles Foxe who averaged 97 per cent in each. Subsequent classes retained these high standards.

1 A complete account of the military activity at Tuskegee, the struggles and triumphs of the Negro flying men and their subsequent war records is given by Charles E. Francis in his book THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN, published in 1955 by Bruce Humphries, Inc., Boston, Mass.

2 Foxe became a career commercial pilot and at one time ran a fixed base operation at Glen Rock airport near Norfolk, Va., one of a small group of Negro pilots who were able to go into business for themselves as a result of their CPTP training.
Hampton Institute's advanced instructor contingent at Tuskegee in 1942.

The other Negro colleges, being smaller than Tuskegee, were not equipped to operate on a similar scale. However, all of the CPTP courses at Tuskegee were available to elementary graduates of these schools.

Information supplied by their various Departments of Education show that:

Between 1939 and 1942, a total of 175 men were certificated at Hampton Institute and more than half of them went on to Tuskegee where 29 became instructors in the advanced courses. Additionally, Hampton graduates comprised some two-thirds of the instructor force at the Institute's Army Primary Flying School.

Delaware State College, which took part in the CPTP for three years, has figures for only the first two; these show that 10 students were certificated the first year and 20 the second. The number who went into secondary training is not available.

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University had an enrollment of 60 between 1939 and 1942 and certificated all but 10. Many of its graduates took the advanced military training, were commissioned, and saw service both in Europe and the Pacific. Complete records on the accomplishments of these men are not available; something is known about the following three:

Lieutenant Calvin Harris, after service during the war, retired and became a civilian flight instructor.

Lieutenant Sam Bruce, one of the best known pilots in the group, was killed in action in Italy preparing for the American landing at Anzio Beach.

Lieutenant Theodore Wilson remained in the service. Immediately after the war an Air Force ROTC was established at the College and con-
times to this day, graduating annually about 25 officers. By 1960, Lieutenant Wilson had become Lieutenant Col. Wilson and was assigned to A&T as Professor of Air Science.

Howard University, in Washington, D.C., had a 1939–40 quota of 11 primary students, and a 1940–41 quota of 10. From the initial class, who were all certificated, three went into the advanced classes at Tuskegee; and an equal number from the second group followed the next year. By the time the third program was being organized, the country was at war and for many reasons, among them a lack of qualified applicants, the CPTP at that University came to an end.

![Miss Dorothy Layne, student at West Virginia State College.](image)

West Virginia State College, located at Institute, West Virginia, is a small school, and in its CPTP years, 1939 through 1942, graduated 70 primary students, but what it lacked in numbers it made up for in achievements. It has the distinction of being the first Negro college to win CPTP approval. Credit for this goes to the school’s President, John W. Davis who, always on alert for new opportunities for his students, sent Mr. James C. Evans, Director of Trade and Technical Education, and Mr. Joseph Grider, a faculty member, to Washington armed with a complete plan endorsed by state aviation officials. They presented it to the CAA and in record time the contract was in their hands.

West Virginia State enrolled a number of white trainees in its 1940 summer unit, which undoubtedly made it the first educational institution in West Virginia to integrate its classes.

Two young ladies, Miss Brown also enrolled that summer and

West Virginia State had a good run of luck in the nearby Kanawha River, a pilots—one man and one woman. Patrol.

It may also be said of West Virginia Air Force. One of its CPTP completing advanced work at West Virginia State to be examined by the State Board.devise member of the famous 99th wing of Tuskegee Institute, and the P-51 in training recently with the group.

It was on January 17, 1944, that Negroes would henceforth be combat flying at Tuskegee in the 99th. Since then, the group has been moved to different bases as the need requires. The complement was 33 officer pilots and 400 officers and enlisted men, Lt. Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., was the group’s commander.

Miss Dorothy Layne, student at West Virginia State College.

In February 1944 the squadron was also in command of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., as Twelfth Air Force, using P-51s, armed reconnaissance missions. It lost not only a bomber to a fighter plane, but also a P-51 on May 24, 1944, from April 29, 1944, to April 29, 1945, fought as an officer pilot with fighter planes. Miss Dorothy Layne, student at West Virginia State College.

The Group received a Distinguished Service Cross, March 24, 1945, when it escorted the interceptors that attacked oil refineries, factories and other industrial targets in France, Germany, Italy, France, Germany, Italy, and Roumania, Bulgaria and Greece. The group was also credited with shooting down 12 enemy aircraft and destroying many more.

It was returned to the United States in July, having campaigned over the battlefields of the D-Day invasion, the Po Valley, the Alpine front and Normandy.

In 1959, Col. Davis was promoted to Brigadier General, and in 1960, he retired from the service.

---

*From The Air Force History*
Two young ladies, Miss Rose Agnes Rolls and Miss Mary L. Parker, were also enrolled that summer and both became qualified pilots.

West Virginia State had the only Negro CPTP Scaplane Unit, based in the nearby Kanawha River, and was the first Negro college to place its CPTP pilots—one man and one woman—in an established wing of the Civil Air Patrol.

It may also be said of West Virginia State that it helped integrate the Air Force. One of its CPTP students, George Spencer Roberts, after completing advanced work at Tuskegee in 1941, was the first Negro from his home State to be examined and accepted into the Air Force. He became a member of the famous 99th Pursuit Squadron and remained on active duty until retiring recently with the rank of Colonel.

It was on January 17, 1941, when the War Department announced that Negroes would henceforth be accepted into the Air Force and trained in combat flying at Tuskegee Institute, and on March 19, 1941, the 99th Pursuit Squadron was activated officially. However, it was April 2, 1943, before the 99th boarded the evacuation train en route to overseas duty. Its complement was 33 officer pilots (half of them CPTP graduates), a ground force of 400 officers and enlisted men, and 33 aircraft. In command was Lt. Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a West Point graduate who went through primary, basic and advanced military pilot training at the TAAF, Field No. 3.

In February 1944 the squadron became part of the 33d Fighter Group, also in command of Colonel Davis, and began operations in Italy with the Twelfth Air Force, using P-40s to escort convoys, protect harbors and fly armed reconnaissance missions. In all its 200 escort missions the Group lost not a single bomber to enemy fighters. Later the Group converted to faster planes—P-47s and P-51s—and operated with the Fifteenth Air Force from May 1944 to April 1945, protecting bombers that struck such objectives as oil refineries, factories, airfields, and marshalling yards in Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Roumania, Bulgaria and Greece. Also they made strafing attacks on air-dromes, railways, highways, bridges, river traffic, troop concentrations, radar facilities, power-stations and other targets.

The Group received a Distinguished Unit Citation for a mission made on March 21, 1945, when it escorted B-17s during a raid on a factory at Berlin, fought the interceptors that attacked the formation, and strafed transportation facilities while flying safely back to the base in Italy.

It was returned to the United States in October 1945 and inactivated the same month, having campaigned in Northern France, Southern France, the Pyrenees, the Po Valley, the Rhineland, Central Europe, Rome-Arno, and Normandy.1

In 1939, Col. Davis was made a Brigadier General, the first Negro to achieve that rank in the Air Force. In 1965 he was promoted to three-star rank, setting another precedent for the Negro in the military. Lt. Gen. Davis retired from the service on February 1, 1970. After a series of sky-

---

1From The Air Force Historian and Air Force Combat Units of World War II.
jackings, holding of hostages and destruction of aircraft, President Nixon, the following September, appointed General Davis Director of Civil Aviation Security for the Department of Transportation.

Air Force Brigadier General Daniel James, Jr., Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. General James learned to fly in the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Tuskegee Institute, completing all its courses. Later as a civilian flight instructor he taught Army Air Corps cadets, also at Tuskegee, until he became one himself. Commissioned a Second Lieutenant in July, 1943, General James was confirmed in his present rank on March 31, 1970.

On December 29, 1969, President Nixon nominated Colonel Daniel James, Jr., of Pensacola, Fla., a member of the 99th and 33d, for the rank of Brigadier General and he was confirmed on March 31, 1970. General James, familiarly known as “Chief,” was at Tuskegee, one of the original “hands on” airplanes as a stunt was outstanding, as was his duty in the Pentagon.

Commenting on Negro distinguished educator George Stagg at Tuskegee Institute, and has this to say:

We, at Tuskegee Institute, take both the elements of Civil Aeronautics Act.

While in parts of not legal, a few students had Tuskegee not good have become flight it doubts that were it not there would have been.

Tuskegee's efforts segregation because of rights. As a matter of participation, particularly in open Air Corps train.

This was a hot issue Tuskegee are concerned to Tuskegee for training the same thing—insist that Negro students as pilots. The few Negro units (at that not gotten through because set up for them.

As I look back, a wonder that I might have greater number of Negro for despite the number other Negro colleges, the flyers because of the lack.

However, I feel that the CPTP and the fact that the CAA was not casualties been different development of the flight Tuskegee and, I understand instituted.
familiarly known as "Chappie" got his early flight training in the CPTP at Tuskegee, one of the many notable pilots who "first saw and put their hands on" airplanes as a result of that Program. His World War II record was outstanding, as was his record in Korea where, as a Command Pilot, he completed more than 100 combat missions. General James is presently on duty in the Pentagon, as Deputy Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs.

Commenting on Negro participation in the CPTP and the WTS, the distinguished educator George L. Washington, who directed the CAA Programs at Tuskegee Institute, and was in a position to oversee the military training, has this to say:

We, at Tuskegee Institute, were much concerned to see that Negro college students, in the South particularly, be given the opportunity to take both the elementary and advanced flying courses offered by the Civil Aeronautics Authority.

While in parts of the Nation, where segregation of the Negro was not legal, a few students might have gotten this training, nonetheless had Tuskegee not gone all out for aviation, I doubt that many would have become flight instructors or commercial pilots. I have serious doubts that were it not for the Civilian Pilot Training Program that there would have been a 99th Pursuit Squadron or a 33d Fighter Group.

Tuskegee's efforts might well now be referred to as encouraging segregation because of the radical change in thinking today on civil rights. As a matter of fact, Negroes were split on Tuskegee's endorsement of and participation in the separate military pilot training operation, particularly in view of the NAACP's unsuccessful efforts to crack open Air Corps training at established military flying training bases. This was a hot issue in 1940. But so far as I and other officials at Tuskegee are concerned (as well as the Negro colleges which sent boys to Tuskegee for training) if we had to do it over again we would do the same thing—insist on separate training centers in order to insure that Negro students got a fair opportunity to demonstrate their ability as pilots. The few Negroes who would have been taken into the established units (at that time) would have been lost and few would have gotten through because of psychological deterrents and real obstacles set up for them.

As I look back, any criticism of the Civil Aeronautics Administration that I might have would be that it did not grant programs to a greater number of Negro colleges, and increase the individual quotas. For despite the number of students turned out at Tuskegee, and the other Negro colleges, the draft board got too many qualified elementary fliers because of the limited number of advanced slots at Tuskegee.

However, I feel that some consideration must be given to the fact that the CPTP and the WTS were really war programs, which meant that the CAA was not free to do what it might have done had the circumstances been different. Normally CAA was most cooperative in the development of the flight programs for our young Negro men at Tuskegee and, I understand, at the other colleges where the Program was instituted.