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FORUM

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN AVIATION

Patricia W. Harris and Patrick K. Alexander

Editor's Note: Articles appearing in the Forum section of JAAER are non-refereed.

Despite the enthusiasm for aviation sparked by the historic flight of the Wright brothers in 1903, participation by African-Americans in the new flight age did not come easily. African-American aviators are scarcely known in the development of aviation due to opposition from the government, trade unions, and individuals acting out of their own prejudice. Thus, racial discrimination stood as a powerful barrier to African-American involvement in aviation.

Within the aviation community, a widely held notion existed that African-Americans lacked the aptitude to fly. As a result, they were excluded from flight instruction. Faced with racial discrimination at home, Eugene Bullard and Bessie Coleman, the first African-Americans to become licensed pilots, received their training in France.

Bullard represented the breakthrough for African-American men in aviation. He served as a foot soldier in the French Foreign Legion and later became a pilot with the LaFayette Escadrille in 1917. "He was then assigned to a French Fighter Squadron as a pilot flying Spad fighters and was eventually awarded the coveted French Croix de Guerre with a star for his achievements in combat during World War I" (Bacon, Garthright, & Hall, 1983, p. 36).

Just as Bullard represented the first breakthrough for African-American men in aviation, Coleman represented the first breakthrough for African-American women in aviation. After she obtained her license overseas in 1922, she returned to the United States and pursued a career as a barnstormer. During an air show in Florida her brief career came to a tragic end at the age of 27. Her tombstone states that she "fell 5,300 feet while flying at Jacksonville, Florida 30 April 1926."

By the time of Charles Lindbergh's flight to Paris in 1927, African-Americans began to break into aviation in small numbers. Flying clubs appeared first in Los Angeles

and later in Chicago. Los Angeles became an important center for African-American aviation. In 1929, inspired by the Coleman's legacy, William J. Powell formed the Bessie Coleman Aero Club to promote aviation in the African-American community. In 1931, the flying club sponsored the first all African-American air show in the United States, attracting an estimated 15,000 spectators.

Powell, one of the first African-American pilots, published *Black Wings* in 1934 and dedicated it to Coleman. The book urged African-American men and women "to fill the air with black wings" (Hardesty & Pisano, 1983, p. 7). Powell influenced African-American youth to take control of their destinies and become the future pilots, aircraft designers, and business leaders in aviation.

Organized by John C. Robinson, the Challenger Air Pilots Association was Chicago's first African-American flying club. Because African-Americans had been excluded from established airports in the Chicago area, the club built its first airstrip in Robbins, Ill., in 1933. "Both men (Powell and Robinson) saw clearly that African-Americans needed technical skills, not individual exploits in barnstorming, to establish their place in aviation" (Hardesty & Pisano, 1983, p. 2). Despite the Depression, the number of African-American aviators increased significantly through the two schools.

African-American aviation in Los Angeles achieved

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its greatest success with the 1932 transcontinental flight of James H. Banning and Thomas C. Allen. The first African-American transcontinental aviators obtained a used airplane and took off with less than \$100 for expenses. Nicknamed the Flying Hobos, they completed the flight in 41 hours and 27 minutes.

In 1933 and 1934 Charles A. Anderson and Albert E. Forthe demonstrated through long-distance flights the growing competence of African-American pilots. They displayed extraordinary skill at flying in their quest for full equality in aviation. In 1933, they flew from Atlantic City to Los Angeles and back, the first round-trip transcontinental flight by African-American pilots. However, the Anderson-Forthe team is better known for its Pan American Goodwill flight of 1934. The purpose of this flight was to promote interracial harmony and to demonstrate the growing skills of African-American pilots. They named the aircraft the Spirit of Booker T. Washington. The initial leg of the trip was from Miami to Nassau, the first ever by a land plane. They made stops in Havana, Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Grenada, and Trinidad. The fliers displayed incredible skill in Nassau when they landed the Spirit of Booker T. Washington at night on a dirt road, using automobile lights for illumination. The plane was damaged while taking off from an improvised airstrip on the return trip from Trinidad, ending the Caribbean voyage.

Through their bold flying, the Anderson-Forthe team attracted worldwide attention. In the Caribbean, the U.S. Department of State supported the team. "At home, the flight provided the African-American community with a sense of pride. Both men hoped that the long distance flights would inspire African-American youth to see aviation as a new avenue for advancement" (Hardesty & Pisano, 1983, p. 17).

By the end of the 1930s, the role of African-Americans in aviation changed significantly, first as civilian pilots and then as military pilots. The year 1939 saw the admission of African-Americans into the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPT), which was established by the CAA (Civil Aeronautics Authority) to provide a pool of African-American flight instructors for Tuskegee Army Air Field, the center for

African-American military aviation during World War II. Charles A. Anderson, better known as Chief, was selected as one of the first primary instructors for the CPT in 1941. Chief Anderson trained many cadets during the primary phase of training at Tuskegee Army Air Field. Among his students was the future Air Force general, Daniel "Chappie" James. Chief Anderson in 1932 became the first African-American to earn a commercial rating. "By the time he had arrived in Tuskegee, he had over 3,500 flight hours in the air" (Rose, 1982, p. 30). Approximately 2,000 black pilots received their wings through CPT during the war.

Dr. Fredrick Patterson, then president of Tuskegee Institute, tried to persuade the War Department to use African-Americans as combat pilots.

Although America's armed forces were critically short of pilots when war was looming in Europe and the Pacific, a War Department report in the 1920's concluded that African-Americans did not have the intelligence or the discipline to fly airplanes. ("Tuskegee's Top Guns," 1993)

First lady Eleanor Roosevelt, however, helped dispel this racist stereotype and did much to promote the cause of equal opportunities for African-Americans. She looked with special interest at the Tuskegee program and in March 1941 she visited Tuskegee Institute for a flight with Chief Anderson. This event had considerable impact on African-American aviation, for Eleanor Roosevelt influenced her husband to provide federal funding for the training of African-American fighter pilots. They achieved their spot in military aviation after a series of legislative moves by Congress made possible the activation of the first all African-American 99th fighter squadron on March 22, 1941. The Tuskegee Army Air Field became the focal point for the training of African-American military pilots during World War II. Cadets were put through intensive ground school, where they learned meteorology, navigation, and instrument training. But the War Department and the Air Corps did not like the idea of African-American pilots flying combat. The government's approval of the training of

African-American fighter pilots was considered to be only an experiment, one that many fighter pilots thought the War Department did not want to succeed.

On June 2, 1943, the 99th flew its first combat mission over Pantelleria, an island near Sicily. A little more than a month later, on July 21, 1943, Charles Hall became the first African-American fighter pilot to down an enemy aircraft. This event was also the 99th squadron's first victory. Hall was flying a P-40 and completed his combat tour, downing a total of three enemy aircraft.

In 1944, as more pilots graduated from Tuskegee, three more African-American squadrons were formed: the 100th, 301st, and 302nd fighter squadrons, known collectively as the 332nd Fighter Group. It was the only fighter group to fly four different fighters in the war: the P-40 Warhawk, the P-39 Airacobras, the P-47 Thunderbolt, and the P-51 Mustang. During the war, the African-American fighter squadrons participated in Allied campaigns in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. The 332nd Fighter Group was known as the Red Tails because of the distinctive tail markings on its P-51 Mustangs.

The four-squadron fighter group performed a diverse role for the remainder of the War, attacking enemy installations and troop concentrations, engaging in air combat in the skies of northern Italy, and providing effective escort for American bombers over central and eastern Europe. (Hardesty & Pisano, 1983, p. 41)

The members of the 332nd Fighter Group took great pride in the fact that out of all fighter groups of the Fifteenth Air Force, the 332nd squadron was the only one that did not lose a bomber to enemy aircraft. "The 332nd pilots flew over 200 missions, shot down or damaged 400 German aircraft, won 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and 744 air medals" ("Tuskegee's Top Guns," 1993). The Tuskegee "experiment" proved that African-American pilots had the intelligence and discipline for combat flying.

Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Jr., who in 1936 became the first African-American graduate of West Point,

commanded the 99th and later the 332nd squadron. He emphasized hard work, self discipline, self-respect, professionalism, and combat efficiency. African-American airmen returned from the war with a sense of accomplishment. "Benjamin Davis's command broadened the role that African-Americans could play in America's fighting forces, and served as a catalyst for the inevitable racial integration of the United States military" (Davis, 1991, p.1). Wartime segregation had proven inefficient and expensive. With the demonstration of African-American capability in military aviation came a transformation of national policy. In 1948, President Truman initiated Executive Order 9981, which called on the armed forces to provide equal treatment and opportunity for all servicemen. In 1949, the U.S. Air Force became the first armed service to implement this historic change in direction. In 1954, Benjamin O. Davis Jr. became the first African-American lieutenant general in the Air Force.

Having proved their ability to fly combat missions during World War II, African-Americans found increased opportunities for making the military a profession during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. For example, Lt. William E. Brown excelled with the U.S. Air Force, flying 125 combat missions in the Korean War and 100 missions in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Jesse L. Brown was the first African-American naval aviator during the Korean War. Brown was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, and the Purple Heart for his support missions in the Korean War. General Daniel "Chappie" James also was a combat veteran of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, flying many war-time missions and holding many leadership roles until his death in 1978. "During the latter part of his career, James carried the responsibility of protecting the U.S. from air or missile attack as Commander in Chief of the North American Defense Command" (Phelps, 1991, p. 91).

By the 1960s, African-Americans began to appear in commercial aviation, due largely to the gains in military aviation and the passage of civil rights legislation. As the social climate changed, African-Americans began to make strides toward breaking down racial barriers in the airline industry. One of the first African-Americans to break into commercial aviation was Perry H. Young. After

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servicing as a civilian flight instructor at Tuskegee during World War II, he became a licensed helicopter pilot and in 1956 was hired by a scheduled helicopter airline, New York Airways. After 22 years with New York Air, he became chief pilot.

In 1965, Marlon D. Green won a long court battle with Continental Airlines over his right to a job as a commercial pilot. As a result of this case, African-Americans began to progress in the airline industry. Another man who broke down barriers was Captain David E. Harris. He became the first African-American pilot to be employed by a major airline when he joined American Airlines in the mid-1960s.

In the 1970s, African-Americans entered the ranks of the astronaut program. Although the pace of putting African-American astronauts into space has been slow, the 1980s saw the first group of African-American astronauts training for the space shuttle program. On Aug. 30, 1983, Guion S. Bluford became the first African-American astronaut in space. Today, we have African-American shuttle commanders Fredrick D. Gregory and Charles F. Bolden and, most recently, the first African-American woman in space, Dr. Mae Jamison.

The role that African-Americans can play in aviation is still underdeveloped. According to the House

Government Operations Transportation Subcommittee, fewer than half of one percent of all pilots at major carriers are African-Americans; the airlines employ more than 45,000 pilots and only about 200 are African-Americans. It seems that more efforts need to be exerted to enhance aviation awareness among African-Americans. Historically black universities can play an important role in promoting aviation education to students. Aviation-related modules could be incorporated in many subjects, such as physics, statistics, management, and economics. These universities also can establish partnerships with the public and private sectors to give students internship opportunities in aviation. Field visits can be arranged for students to visit airports and other aviation facilities, with summer job opportunities made available at these facilities for students achieving high grades in mathematics, physics, and statistics. Universities could enter into agreements with many flying instructional schools, so that theoretical courses can be offered and taught at these universities while ground and flying lessons are taught at the airport. Finally, faculty at these universities ought to be encouraged to conduct research on aviation-related opportunities and to pursue external funding from state and federal agencies.□

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