



Smithsonian
Institution

C. Alfred “Chief ” Anderson

She told me, “I always heard Negroes couldn’t fly and I wondered if you’d mind taking me up.” All her escorts got tremendously upset and told her she shouldn’t do it. . . . When we came back, she said, “Well, you can fly all right.” I’m positive that when she went home, she said, “Franklin, I flew with those boys down there, and you’re going to have to do something about it.”
—C. Alfred Anderson, *A-Train: Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman*

C. Alfred “Chief ” Anderson is often called the “Father of Black Aviation,” because he spent at least six decades training and mentoring countless African American aviators. Interested in flying from a young age, he saved enough money by the time he was twenty to take flying lessons, but could not find a school that would accept a black student. With his savings and some borrowed money, he bought his own plane and begged for lessons from any pilot who would listen. He finally found an instructor in Ernest Buehl, a German World War I pilot who had immigrated to the United States. Anderson earned his Private Pilot Certificate in 1929, and in 1932 he became the first black to receive his Transport License. He became friends with Dr. Albert E. Forsythe and taught Forsythe to fly. Together, in 1934, they were the first black pilots to make a round-trip continental flight.

In 1939 Anderson initiated the Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) program at Howard University. Soon he was hired to be the first African American pilot instructor at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, which had the largest CPT program for blacks.

He was an inspiring instructor. Although many thought it couldn’t be done, “Chief ” created expert pilots at Tuskegee. As the chief civilian flight instructor at Tuskegee, Anderson trained Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., and Daniel “Chappie” James. He was known and loved by the thousands of pilots he trained during his fifty-three years as an instructor.

The most famous photograph of “Chief ” Anderson shows him smiling from the cockpit of his plane, as a beaming Eleanor Roosevelt sits behind him. The photograph was taken in 1941 during Mrs. Roosevelt’s fact-finding trip to Tuskegee. As First Lady, Mrs. Roosevelt did much to promote the cause of equal opportunity for black Americans. Over the Secret Service’s objections, she flew with Anderson to show her support for the Tuskegee program. According to Anderson, the Army Air Corps began training blacks several days after Mrs. Roosevelt’s flight.