



Smithsonian
Institution

Secondary Source: African American Pioneer Aviators

The term *black aviation* describes a historical fact: For the first half century of powered flight, blacks flew in segregated circumstances. The story of black aviation is one of breakthroughs against restrictions. First, such isolated pioneers as Bessie Coleman overcame the entrenched discrimination of the time. Coleman's brief career as a stunt pilot inspired a generation of black youth. Even so, at the time of Lindbergh's historic flight to Paris in 1927, only a few blacks had become aviators. Racial prejudice excluded most.

In the 1930s African Americans formed flying clubs to promote aviation in the black community. The clubs made it possible for African Americans to participate in aviation: Their members trained pilots and mechanics and promoted aviation through publications, lectures, and even air "circuses." These air shows drew the curious with promises of "aerial acrobatics, rolls, turns, spins, ribbon cutting, crazy flying." In 1933 and 1934 the long-distance flights of C. Alfred Anderson and Dr. Albert E. Forsythe displayed both flyers' skills while appealing for equality in aviation. In Los Angeles William J. Powell set up the Bessie Coleman Aero Club and wrote his visionary book *Black Wings*, which urged black youth to choose careers in aviation. In Chicago Cornelius R. Coffey established the Coffey School of Aeronautics, served as the first president of the National Airmen's Association, and built an airstrip in an African American community. Both Powell and Coffey recognized that blacks would need technical skills to advance in aviation.

In 1939 the Chicago flyers, with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), spurred the federal government to offer aviation training programs for blacks. Congress had established the Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) program to train pilots for a wartime emergency, and now for the first time African Americans received flight training at federally funded CPT schools. Despite the modest budget allocated for the segregated black training program, the number of licensed black pilots grew dramatically.

When the U.S. Army Air Corps activated the 99th Fighter Squadron in 1942, blacks achieved their first foothold in military aviation. Civil rights leaders long had called for integrating African Americans into the Air Corps, but the War Department continued to resist. When black cadets trained at the newly established Tuskegee Army Airfield, they flew as part of a separate black air force. Between 1941 and

1945, the Tuskegee airmen proved that blacks could be trained and mobilized for the sophisticated task of combat flying. In World War II, the 99th Fighter Squadron and three other all-black fighter units composed the 332d Fighter Group. These units demonstrated that the decision to train African American flyers had been a good one. The 332d's commander, Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., stressed professionalism and combat efficiency. His leadership helped eliminate hostility toward blacks' participation. Black airmen, returning from the war with a sense of accomplishment, were impatient with the segregation they had experienced both overseas and at home.

The Tuskegee Airmen forever shattered the myth that blacks lacked the technical skills for combat flying. The war years had exposed the cost and inefficiency of maintaining separate black air units. In 1948 President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 981 called for equal opportunity in the armed forces. In 1949 the Air Force became the first armed service to integrate. Very slowly, civilian aviation followed suit. In the 1960s African Americans were hired and promoted to positions of responsibility in commercial aviation. In 1965 Marlon D. Greene won a long court battle with Continental Airlines over his right to a job as a commercial pilot. As a result of this important case, blacks began to break down racial barriers in the airline industry. In the late 1960s blacks entered the ranks of the space program.

The most recent generation of black aviators has garnered many firsts: Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr., the first black four-star general; Dr. Guion Bluford, Jr., first African American to go into space; Mae Jemison, the first black woman astronaut; and Patrice Clarke-Washington, the first black female captain to fly for a major airline. Nonetheless, progress has been slow, and blacks are still underrepresented in the aviation industry. But with legal obstacles removed, and their participation increasing, today's flyers could make a reality of William Powell's vision—"to fill the air with black wings."