

Charles W. Dryden, 87; WWII Pilot Flew Fighters as Tuskegee Airman

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(below) Dryden, in a P-40 Warhawk, talks with future General Benjamin O. Davis before a mission. (1943 AP photo)



(above) Dryden, part of the second graduating class of Tuskegee Airmen, kept memorabilia of the program in his home. (photo by Nick Arroyo-*Atlanta Journal Constitution*)

Charles W. Dryden, who helped make history as one of the early members of the Tuskegee Airmen to pilot fighters during World War II, died June 24 at his home in Atlanta. He was 87.

The retired Air Force lieutenant colonel had diabetes and high blood pressure and had been ill briefly, his family said.

Col. Dryden, a native of New York City, graduated from the second class of pilots to emerge from an Army Air Corps program started in 1941 to train blacks to fly for the military.

He was one of three Tuskegee Airmen to die last week. George A. Taylor, 85, of Chicago, a pilot who reached the rank of captain, died June 25, and retired Maj. John T. "Jack" Willis, 87, of Madison, Wis., a meteorologist, died June 26.

"The Tuskegee Airmen are a national treasure," said Ron Brewington, public relations officer for the airmen. "We are losing them at the rate of about five a month. We miss the ones we have lost. We are holding on to the others as long as we can and remembering their legacy."

Col. Dryden was accepted into the program for black pilots at the Tuskegee Army Flying School in August 1941, according to military records. Commissioned as a second lieutenant on April 29,

1942, he was one of only three pilots to successfully finish his training class, said retired Lt. Bill Broadwater, a Clinton resident and member of the airmen's archives committee.

"The training was very rigorous. It was early morning until dark," Broadwater said. "The process was you went to preflight school for 10 weeks, which was all ground school, everything you needed to do for basic training -- no flying. The second 10 weeks you flew a half-day and went to school a half-day. There were 40 weeks of training total. A lot of people didn't make it out. The washout rate was about 50 percent."

Col. Dryden was one of the first members of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, the first all-black squadron of fliers. The squadron saw action in North Africa, Sicily and Italy during World War II.

Even as a young pilot, Col. Dryden demonstrated a flair that made him one of the favorites in a huge group of heroes. Known as a gentleman and an intellectual, he was popular among pilots and support personnel alike, said retired Col. Elmer Jones, then a maintenance supervisor with the black pilots.

"We went overseas with the 99th together," Jones said. "We played poker together. Sometimes [future general] Benjamin O. Davis [Jr.] would play with us, too. He always had a lot of fun."

As a pilot, Col. Dryden flew a P-40 Warhawk, which he nicknamed A-Train, after the subway line in Manhattan that he often rode and that was made famous by Duke Ellington. In 1997, he used the nickname, by which he was sometimes known, as the title of his biography: "A-Train: Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman." An HBO film about the pilots featured actor Cuba Gooding Jr. as a character named A-Train from New York who was a composite of several of the pilots, Broadwater said.

On June 9, 1943, he led six pilots in a battle with enemy aircraft over Pantelleria, Sicily. "One of the pilots on that mission, Charles Hall, shot down the first enemy aircraft ever shot down by a black pilot," Broadwater said. "They made history with that flight."

Col. Dryden's military career spanned 21 years. After returning from Europe, he trained black pilots. He later flew missions in Korea, held duty assignments in Japan, Germany and 10 bases in the United States and taught air science at Howard University.

He retired in 1962 as a command pilot, the highest military designation for a flier, with a career total of 4,000 flying hours, records show.

In a Washington Post interview three years ago, Col. Dryden said he fell in love with flying as a child. After graduating from high school, he received a bachelor's degree in political science from Hofstra University in New York. In 1957, he received a master's degree in public law and government from Columbia University.

Lt. Col. Dryden said none of the "the black pilots," as they were known at the time, was thinking about making history when joining the Tuskegee program.

"We just wanted to fly airplanes," he said. "Most of us had fallen in love with flying when we were children and had few opportunities to fly. Once the Army Air Corps announced the program for black pilots, we all jumped at the chance. It was the best thing I ever did."

The pilots became known as the Tuskegee Airmen in the 1950s, Broadwater said.

Col. Dryden was an inductee and board member of the Georgia Aviation Hall of Fame. He also was a member of the board of the Atlanta Chapter-Tuskegee Airmen Inc., which he helped found in 1978.

In March last year, Col. Dryden was among hundreds of Tuskegee Airmen who received the Congressional Gold Medal from President Bush in a ceremony in the Capitol Rotunda.