



### ***Tuskegee Airman Lands in Allen*** ***By Peggy Helmick-Richardson***

As a boy growing up in New Jersey in the 1930s, Calvin Spann dreamed of flying. Zack Mosley's newspaper comic strip pilot "Smilin' Jack" was one of his favorites, and he envied those who could afford the one dollar fee charged by the traveling barnstormers for a short flight.

Even as a young student, Calvin demonstrated a fighting spirit and determination to achieve his dreams. By age 16, he was already a champion Golden Gloves boxer.

"When the war broke out, I was a senior in high school. I thought this was my opportunity to fly, so I volunteered," Calvin declares. "Most of my friends were drafted. In order for me to get to where I wanted to go, I would have to volunteer."

So Calvin passed a two year college equivalency test and, at age 17, he was called up to serve in the Army Air Corps. This was in May of 1943, one month before his graduation from Rutherford High School in Rutherford, New Jersey. "My sister had to go up and get my diploma, because I was gone," he grins.

This bright and enthusiastic young patriot immediately met with the cruel prejudice prevalent in so much of our country at that time.

"They sent me to Kessler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi, and they wouldn't train me because I was black," he explains. "They sent me on to Tuskegee where they had an experimental program that I was not aware of."

### **A brief history of the Tuskegee Airmen**

Although the United States government had already established civilian pilot training programs that included African American aviators prior to World War II, training facilities were segregated.

The U.S. Army Air Corps was the first branch of the United States military to expand their programs allowing African American service people opportunities for challenging



military roles and higher levels of advancement. But segregated training was still the accepted practice.

Because it already had an airfield and proven success rate in training pilots for the civilian program, Tuskegee University received the first U.S. Army Air Corps contract to train their African American pilots. Located in Tuskegee, Alabama, and named for Tuskegee University's second president Dr. Robert Moton, Moton Field served as the school's training ground for 992 pilots from 1941 to 1946. In addition, thousands of others studied in such fields as medicine, mechanics, control tower operations and intelligence.

Under the direction of Col. Benjamin Davis, Jr., 450 of the Tuskegee Airmen, as the Tuskegee trained pilots came to be known, flew World War II missions over North Africa and Europe in P.39, P.40, P.47 and P.50 aircraft. These men served in either the 99th Fighter Squadron or the 332nd Fighter Group. The first black West Point graduate, Col. Davis was one of the five who graduated from a class of originally 13 men in the first nine month training at Tuskegee. Col. Davis later earned the distinction of being the U.S. Air Force's first African American general.

Eventually, the 332nd Fighter Group consisted of four fighter squadrons—the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd. The 99th Fighter Squadron received two Presidential Unit Citations for their tactical air support and air combat in Italy in 1943 and 1944, and the 332nd Fighter Group earned a Presidential Unit Citation for their mission escorting bombers to Berlin in March of 1945. These brave airmen also distinguished themselves by achieving the singular distinction of never losing an escorted bomber to enemy plane fire.

Because of the red markings on the tails of their aircraft, the Tuskegee Airmen were given the moniker "Red Tail Angels" by the bomber crews they escorted. The German Luftwaffe referred to them as "Schwarz Vogelmenshen" or "Black Bird Men."

### **Calvin's Tuskegee experience**



"We all became aware that the government was calling it an 'experimental' program," Calvin notes. "It inspired us to make sure it succeeded." He describes the trainees' response as an "I'll show you" attitude.

"When I first got there from Biloxi, the fellows who were already training there told me, 'They think we are going to fail, and if you think that way, don't stay here, because we are going to show them that we are going to succeed.'"

Calvin explains that establishing training centers for African American U.S. Army Corps pilots meant overcoming long established racism in the military. "Black newspapers

would write these articles about 'Let Our Boys Fight,' a campaign to get minorities jobs in the service that were meaningful. Prior to that, they were cooks or took care of the horses for the cavalry."

In addition to flight training, Calvin states that during the 16 month period he and his fellow classmates were assigned to study at Tuskegee they also received academic instruction "to make sure everybody was on the same level." One discovery that surprised him was that some of the other more educated cadets had not received the level of math and science instruction that he had been taught in high school. Even today, he emphasizes the importance of taking math and science when he makes presentations to students.

Student pilots at Tuskegee first learned to fly the bi wing, open cockpit, two seater Stearman. As their skills increased the pilots advanced to a BT-13, a single wing two seater with fixed landing gear. Advanced students then flew similar planes that had retractable landing gear.

Although Calvin enjoyed the training, he described it as a tense experience. "If you started out with 100, only 20 would graduate. You could be eliminated for little or nothing. It was not enjoyable to see people you cared for be eliminated." He adds, "We helped each other. The teamwork we were able to perform showed them that we could do it, and it was a key to our success."

This high pilot reduction level, coupled with a strong determination, proved to be an impetus for success for Calvin. He recalls that after a bad landing that resulted in bouncing because of cross winds, his instructor yelled at him and bet a carton of cigarettes that the young trainee would wreck a plane before he graduated. "And I said, 'I bet I won't wreck a plane before I graduate!'" the tenacious Allenite laughs. "At graduation, he came to me and let me know, 'You remember the day you had that bad landing? If you didn't take the bet that day, I was going to put you on the list for wash out.'"

Calvin continues, "We didn't know there was a quota system. Only 20 to 30 people could graduate from each class, even though the class would start out with well over 100 applicants. Nobody really admits it, not on paper. But if you look at history, each class was always under 30. The first class only had five graduates."

The level of prejudice in the south at that time also proved to be a difficulty for this northern born young man. "This was the first time I had ever been out of state," Calvin points out. "This segregation thing, even though it existed in New Jersey, it was more outward, more in your face in the south. They tried to provide everything on base and they told us to try and stay on base and not go into town in uniform. I complied with most of this."

His first significant eye opening experience on the level of racism he would encounter in the south occurred during his train trip to report to Kessler Field.

“I was going to Mississippi on a Pullman car and they gave me six meal tickets because it was an overnight trip,” Calvin recounts. “I ate on the dining car until I got through Washington, D.C. I could still eat in it after that but the porters, who were black, would have to pull a curtain round me because if the train would have to pull off in a certain area to wait for another train to pass someone might take a shot at me for eating in a ‘white’ dining car.”

This military hero sadly shakes his head. “That was my first experience with hard core discrimination. The second was when they wouldn’t train me at Kessler Field.” Calvin adds that the recruiters who he enlisted with were unaware that Kessler Field would not accept African American cadets.

### **Flying Combat Duty**

After completing his assignment at Tuskegee, Calvin trained to fly the P47 Thunderbolt at Walterboro, South Carolina. He was then assigned to Italy to fly combat as a member of the 100th Fighter Squadron, under the command of Col. Benjamin Davis.



“We were in Italy on the Adriatic sea—the Ramitelli area in the heel of Italy,” Calvin recalls. “It was a makeshift base. We lived in tents that could sleep four people.” He describes their risky means of heating the tents by running a copper tube from a gasoline tank outside the tent to the inside, where the gas would drip on a rock. To warm their small sleeping space, the men would then burn the gas that dripped on the rock. “We lost a few tents,” he laughs, “but not mine.”

Some of his fonder memories include trading cigarettes for eggs with local villagers and drinking hot beer opened by sticking knives in the cans. And he certainly will never forget the base visit from Lena Horne. “She was a pinup for the guys,” he reminisces. For a number of years, he had a photo of the two of them standing together. He still laments the loss of this treasured memento.

By the end of the war, Lieutenant Calvin Spann had logged in 26 combat missions. Limited by the amount of fuel their planes could hold, Calvin states that the majority of their missions were “five hours, from start to finish.” There was one distinct mission that was the exception to the rule.

“We were chosen to escort the bombers to Berlin and that was the longest mission we ever flew. It came close to six hours and most of us were just about out of fuel,” he emphasizes. Pointing out that this group had 70 planes and that they could only land one at a time, many of the pilots that day were fearful of running out of fuel before they could set down.

In addition to escorting bombers, Calvin's squadron went on reconnaissance missions. "We would only take two planes to escort a third plane. We would go into German territory at low levels and he would take pictures of enemy targets. We were so low to the ground, I could see farmers shaking pitchforks at us." Calvin explains that these treetop flights were intended to avoid notice by radar. "When the farmers detected us, word got around that we were up there, so we would get our job done and get out of there!"

The Allen war hero notes that his family did all they could to support his military effort during the war. When Calvin was still in high school, his father died, making him the oldest male in the family. But when the family home burned down while he was stationed in Italy, his mother ordered all who knew to not tell her son. "I didn't know anything about it until I came back here and they were back in the house by then." Calvin explains that most likely the Red Cross would have had him released from duty to return home and help his family get resettled. This was something his mother would not allow.

At the end of the war, Calvin returned to the United States and was stationed at Lockborne Army Air Base in Columbus, Ohio. He remained in the Air Force Reserves until 1961, when he was honorably discharged.

He opted to leave the reserves because of the limited time allowed for opportunities to fly. "I was trying to go to school at nights and work during the day. I couldn't spend the weekends trying to get a plane and not even get one," he explains. "They didn't allocate enough planes for people to get their time in. And pilots have to fly at least four hours a month to qualify for flying pay. Not getting a chance to fly, I decided to get my discharge."

### **Civilian Life**



Following his military service, Calvin secured a job in chemical production with Universal Oil. He worked here for 20 years and followed this with a 20 year career in pharmaceutical sales. Retiring from this position in the mid 90s, he worked twice for New Jersey's Department of Motor Vehicles. He officially retired from fulltime work three years ago. Currently Calvin works part time as a broker and owner of R&S Realty, a New Jersey based management company.

Calvin has three children. Daughter, Carla Lopez, and her husband, Gino, of Parker have two sons, Carson and Cameron. ("That's the main reason I moved to Allen!" Calvin grins.) Carla currently is a first year student at Baylor College of Dentistry. Calvin II lives at home and attends Collin County Community College and is majoring in business. Daughter, Gai Spann, graduated from Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and owns a travel agency in Brooklyn, New York.

Calvin met his wife Gwenelle Johnson when she was assisting her mother in a family owned catering business that provided service to a local bar in which Calvin had a partnership. They recently celebrated their 26th anniversary. Calvin and Gwenelle moved to Allen from Englewood, New Jersey, one year ago last February.

Through the years, he rarely told anyone, including co workers, about his distinguished military past. Now Calvin devotes a great deal of time sharing his incredible military history and service with the distinguished Tuskegee Airmen with both children and adults. The majority of his audience members were born after 1948, when then President Harry Truman enacted Executive Order No. 9981 which eventually led to the end of racial segregation in the United States military.

In 1998, Congress authorized the funding for the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, a joint effort between Tuskegee University, Tuskegee Airmen Inc., and the National Park Service. At this time, Tuskegee University reports that only \$3.6 million of the authorized \$29 million has been appropriated.

Television, radio and newspaper reporters and oral historians, as well as a writer who is co authoring a biography with him have interviewed Calvin. His home office is decorated with plaques, both old and modern family photos, pictures from his Tuskegee days, and mounted published articles about him. Some of Calvin's memorabilia—medals, uniform and hat—are at the Frontiers of Flight Museum in Washington, D.C.

Gwenelle established GJ Productions, LLC, in 2004 to provide motivational speakers for special events. She describes her service as one offering “real people with real stories who became successful despite the obstacles they encountered.” Her primary focus will be the Tuskegee Airmen and she refers to Calvin as her “star.” Her company's mission is “to inform and educate everyone about the World War II legendary Tuskegee Airmen and their determination to achieve excellence.”

Gwenelle continues, “This is a great story that needs to be told, and if history books won't tell it, I have a living legend who will—my best friend and husband.”

When not devoting time to his educational programs on the Tuskegee Airmen, Calvin loves spending time in the kitchen cooking and baking. His family and friends enjoy his weekly homemade apple pies and occasional cheesecakes, as well as his own pickled okra seasoned with his own recipe of spices.

Missing his many friends back east, Calvin admits to spending a lot of time on the telephone visiting with them. Reading, writing, and watching old movies and television shows like Perry Mason and Matlock are other preferred pastimes.

Long time New York Jets fans, the couple bought season tickets to the team's games every year until they moved to Allen and they still continue to cheer on their favorite team.

**In recent years, Calvin has begun amassing some prestigious honors.**

Already inducted into the New Jersey Aviation Hall of Fame, Calvin, along with Gwenelle, joined a group of other Tuskegee Airmen and their families last year for a visit to the White House for a Veteran's Day event. Also in 2006, Tuskegee University awarded Calvin a Doctor of Public Service degree.

This year, the Spanns returned to the capital for another significant honor. On March 29, the Tuskegee Airmen collectively received the Congressional Gold Medal at the U.S. Capitol. Gwenelle reports that each Tuskegee Airman received a bronze replica of the medal and the original gold medal will be displayed at the Smithsonian Institute.

This well deserved honor that has been a long time coming, will now allow many more of us an opportunity to learn about an almost forgotten, but very significant, piece of American history.

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