

BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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THOMAS F. VAUGHNS



Thomas Franklin Vaughns, a native of Marianna, Arkansas, was born July 12, 1920, to Harrison and Dazzie Vaughns. He and his five siblings grew up during the Depression years on a 50-acre farm owned by their parents, originally purchased in 1872, by his formerly enslaved great-grandfather, Frank Newsom. At age 15, Thomas had a life-changing spiritual experience that inspired him to devote his life to serving others. His valuable farming skills, strong work ethic, close knit family ties and mission to serve others in his community formed the basis for his illustrious career in agriculture.

As a youth, Thomas attended St. John grade school in Felton, Arkansas, a Rosenwald funded school for rural African American children during the 1930's. While many children did not pursue their education beyond grade school, Thomas walked 3.5 miles dressed in his best suit to Robert R. Moton High School, Marianna, through the end of his junior year. At that time, Moton was regarded as the most prestigious "all-Black" high school in Arkansas and Thomas was required to dress the part. Thomas often recalled that his high school years were his most difficult because he needed to help his father on the farm while keeping up with his school studies.



In the summer of 1942, Thomas worked on the railroad in Illinois through the Civilian Conservation Corps, a program of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Having received a telegram from his father informing him that he had been drafted into World War II, Thomas ended his summer employment early to report to Camp Robinson military base in North Little Rock, Arkansas. He would not complete high school until after his honorable service and discharge as a Tuskegee Airman from the Army Air Corps in 1946.

As a novice Army recruit at Camp Robinson, Thomas proudly but unwittingly learned that he had been "promoted" to Kitchen Police. It was not until a superior officer set a large basket of potatoes in front of him that he learned his "promotion" entailed peeling potatoes! After taking an aptitude test, it was determined that Thomas was best suited for training as an aircraft mechanic. The mechanics kept the aircraft flying. Without them, the Tuskegee Airmen could not have completed their missions or training.

Although widely circulated digital references have indicated that the only location where Aircraft Mechanics were trained was at Chanute Field, Illinois, an official copy of Thomas' Certification of Training (also supported by his own personal account), indicate that his months of classroom instruction was completed at McClellan Field and his competency based hands on training was completed at Mather Field. Both McClellan and Mather Fields were based in Sacramento, California. By Thomas' personal account, five commanding "Tech Sergeants", as they were called at that time, were sent from Tuskegee by Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis to assist with the aviation training at McClellan and Mather Fields. Thomas was among a select group of 18-20 aviation mechanics to be trained. Upon receiving his certification as an Army Air Forces Aviation Mechanic, Thomas was a fully qualified expert for advanced crew training to properly inspect, repair and maintain aircrafts to ensure that they were safe and reliable for Pilots and Bombardier training squadrons.

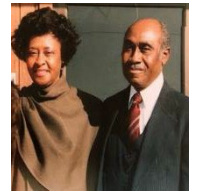


While stationed at the bases in Sacramento, California, Black and White mechanics worked side by side, yet Thomas and his Black comrades were still forced to use segregated bathrooms, laundry facilities and dining halls. After the Black commanding officer investigated the matter, he met with the White officers at Mather Field, going from one location on the base to another, tearing down every sign labeled "Colored". He turned to address the White officers: "Well, I don't see a problem here. Looks like everything's going to be all right." Before departing the base, the Lieutenant privately admonished the Black Mechanics, "And you had better not use any facilities labeled "Colored" again!"

Thomas and the group were later assigned to the Training Command at Tuskegee, Alabama where they served until the War's end. These rare caveats of Tuskegee Airmen oral history, as directly told by an original Tuskegee Airman, have never before been recorded in any known public documents.

Of over 400 trained Aircraft Mechanics, Thomas was one of 18-mechanics transferred to maintain aircraft for training squadrons at the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama. Thomas provided mechanical work on B-25 Mitchell Bombers, a crucial support for the 477th Bombardment Group. While there, he reconnected with his high school pal, fellow Tuskegee Airman and lifelong friend, Jerry T. Hodges, Jr, a Pilot. Jerry Hodges stated the one word that comes to mind to describe Thomas is "perseverance." He once observed that highly skilled mechanics attempted to solve a problem with an aircraft without success. When Thomas decided that he would take on the challenge, the more experienced mechanics were skeptical that he would be successful. After many attempts, Thomas persevered. To their surprise, the aircraft functioned properly and was soon ready for launch.

After World War II and his return to civilian life, DOTA Thomas enrolled in an accelerated program at Washington Tech High School in St. Louis, Missouri. Within a few months, he received his high school diploma. Convinced that higher education was his path to a better future, DOTA Thomas later enrolled in Arkansas' Agricultural, Mechanical & Normal College, now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB), year round and, within three years, earned the Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture in 1949. He did further work on the graduate level at Michigan State University and at the University of Arkansas. While working on his first post-college job teaching veterans in Marianna, DOTA Thomas met the young woman who would become the love of his life, Luvada Lockhart. Within three months following her graduation, the couple were married in June, 1950 and relocated to West Memphis. To supplement his full-time employment as a County Extension Agent, Thomas enlisted in the Army Reserves. The couple never imagined that a few months later Thomas would soon be drafted into the Korean War. Uncertain of their future, DOTA Thomas headed to Fort Hood, Texas, where he was assigned as a Supply Sergeant. The long hours of ordering, tracking inventory and shipping out supplies to combat zones was grueling and exhausting work. When the Korean War ended, DOTA Thomas was honorably discharged and he and Luvada were reunited to resume their lives together.



His agriculture career began during the days of segregation. As an Agricultural Extension Agent in Crittenden county, he continued through the Civil Rights Era offering his advice to those who sought his wisdom. A Community Organizer at DOTA Thomas implemented a pilot project for small farmers whose farms were in economic crisis.



Beginning with enough seeds to grow and harvest 30 acres of vegetables in 1955, this enterprise grew and resulted in 2 million pounds of produce annually and the employment of 1,400 people within six years. He received the Agent of the Year Award by the National Negro County Agent Association in 1964. Despite racially motivated threats against him, his leadership resulted in the establishment of the Arkansas Vegetable Growers and Market Association Cooperative, an organization that helped small farmers gain steady lucrative employment. The venture was replicated in five counties and 6,000 people were employed by 1968. The enterprise was so successful that news reached Washington, D.C. DOTA Thomas was featured in a *Washington Post* article in 1986, where he was dubbed "The Black Guru" for his innovative work with small farmers in the Arkansas Delta.

As an Extension Agent, DOTA Thomas also led an active 4-H group, encouraging over 450 youth and securing the financial means for them to enroll in College. Later, Thomas assumed a leading role in incorporating Sunset, Arkansas. so residents could access the public sewer system and clean drinking water for a healthy living environment. He co-founded the Wonder City Boys' Club in West Memphis so that Black youth could enjoy a safe recreational haven in their community and served as its founding President until 1972 when he was promoted to a UAPB Horticulture Specialist position. In that role, new markets were created through his consultation until his retirement in 1986. He was appointed by then Governor Bill Clinton to serve on the Governor's Farm Advisory Council in which he made a positive impact upon farm policy in Arkansas. DOTA Thomas also co-founded, along with J.B. Williams, the University of Arkansas Lead AR program, which was funded through the Kellogg Foundation, provided leadership seminars and international tours to prepare leaders in various disciplines. Formed in the early 1980's, Lead AR is still "growing" Arkansas' leaders today. DOTA Thomas has done community service with Arkansas Land and Farm Development, Habitat for Humanity, AmeriCorps VISTA, Delta Service Corps, Boys Clubs of America and 4-H Clubs of America.

In September 2019, DOTA Thomas was featured in a *People* magazine article where at a special ceremony given in his honor at UAPB, he was presented with four World War II medals: The World War II Victory Medal, the American Campaign Medal, the Good Conduct Army Medal and the Honorable Service Lapel Button as replacements for medals he earned that had been lost over the years. He was also presented with the National Defense Service Medal for his service in the Korean War, which he had not previously been awarded.



A dedicated member of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity for over 75 years, Thomas received the Fraternity's 75 Year Pin, the Alpha Phi Alpha President's Award and was inducted into the Alpha Phi Alpha Delta Sigma Lambda Chapter Hall of Fame in 2012. He was also inducted into the Robert R. Moton High School Hall of Fame, Marianna (2001), UAPB/AM&N Alumni Hall of Fame (2012) and the Arkansas Agricultural Hall of Fame (2019). In 2018, Thomas received the esteemed Milton P. Crenshaw Aviation Lifetime Achievement Award.

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity

Thomas Vaughns



In 2025, DOTA Thomas gave an inspiring virtual welcome on National Tuskegee Airmen Day for the Regional Annual Conference at LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, TN, where he was acknowledged for his service alongside fellow Arkansas Airmen. Later, DOTA Thomas was a VIP guest at the Annual National HBCU Wall Street Career Fest in Little Rock. At this event, he was honored for his service and acknowledged as the lone surviving Tuskegee Airman in Arkansas by HBCU Career Fest Founder/Organizer and Social Historian, Edmond Davis.

In July 2025, family and friends gathered in Pine Bluff, Arkansas to help DOTA Thomas celebrate his 105th birthday, hosted by Barraque Street Baptist Church, his church family of more than 50 years, where he is Deacon Emeritus. This momentous occasion, included parades and other celebrations sponsored by the local Veterans' Administration, were viewable on YouTube. In November, Thomas was presented with the "Quilt of Valor" by a local veteran's group, "Never Forgotten in Arkansas." The event was widely televised on several media outlets in Arkansas and across the United States. Although this humble, modest humanitarian would never say so, to his credit, he has received literally hundreds of awards throughout his lifetime, including Congressional citations and "Thomas F. Vaughns Day" Proclamations. Highlights of his storied life and career are chronicled in the Encyclopedia of Arkansas and the Library of Congress—true testaments of his dedication to serving his community at home and abroad.

*The Thomas Vaughns Family:
The Way We Were, 1999*

Thomas cherishes the memory of his beautiful and devoted wife of 51 years, Luvada Lockhart Vaughns, also a native of Marianna, who lovingly supported his personal and professional endeavors until her passing in May 2001. Luvada flourished in her own career as a mother and middle school teacher in the public schools for many years. Their children, who so admire and love them both, are Byron (Kate) Vaughns, Spring Vaughns, Hope Vaughns Johnson and grandson, Sean Patrick Johnson. Thomas also has a large loving extended family of nieces, nephews and cousins. His legacy will be honored and preserved by his family, present and future, for generations to come.



Source: Hope Vaughns Johnson

