

BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN INC. PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 830060
TUSKEGEE, AL 36083

JAMES ALONZO COTTEN



James A. Cotten was born on 4 June 4 1927, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He was raised by his aunt, Salina Thomas Hackney in the Beltzhoover section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he moved as a young child. He graduated from South Hills High School where he met his future wife, Oteria Smith at a school dance. They enjoyed dancing together over the years. Together they raised 10 children, settling in Willingboro, New Jersey. Even though the couple settled their family in New Jersey, Chief Master Sergeant (CMSgt) Cotten was a Pittsburgh man through and through.

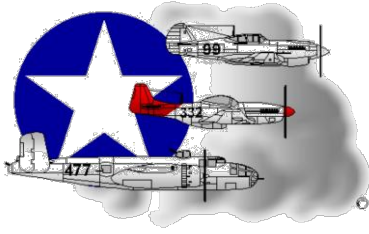
(Special Order 159, 29 Jun 49) Mr. Cotten was drafted into the military from his hometown of Pittsburgh, and was inducted into the U.S. Army at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania on 14 August 1945 at age 18. He was one of more than 100 western Pennsylvania residents who became Tuskegee Airmen. Upon completion of Basic Military Training in January 1946, he was selected for assignment to the 332nd Fighter Group as an Air Operations Specialist, at Lockbourne Army Air Base, Columbus, Ohio. He was assigned there at the end of the war so he never saw combat.

The military was desegregated in 1949 by the executive order of President Harry S. Truman. In that same year, Sergeant Cotten was assigned to the 334th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, 4th Fighter Group as the Air Operations Non-commissioned Officer, Langley Air Force Base (AFB), Virginia. He was the first African American assigned to Langley AFB as part of the desegregation of the military.

After his service at Langley AFB, Sergeant Cotten was stationed at Air Force bases in Hawaii, New Hampshire, Newfoundland, and finally, McGuire AFB, New Jersey. After more than 21 years of active military service in the US Army and the U.S. Air Force, he retired as a Chief Master Sergeant, the highest enlisted rank in the USAF, at McGuire AFB on 31 December 1965. In 1966, CMSgt Cotten embarked on a career as a Civilian Contract Administrator for the Department of Defense at McGuire AFB. He retired from Civil Service in the capacity of Supervisory Contract Administrator for the U.S. Transportation Command Contract Airlift Program in 2012 after 45 years of service. By the time of his retirement from Civil Service at age 85, McGuire AFB became the first joint base: Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst (JBMDL).

On 3 May 2012, CMSgt (Ret) Cotten was presented with his replica Congressional Gold Medal in a ceremony at JBMDL. He was not at the 2007 formal presentation of the medals, because he believed that he was not part of the Tuskegee Airman since he was not a Pilot. In 2013, he was one of 6-Veterans present when President Barack Obama paid tribute to the Tuskegee Airman during the President's inauguration.





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CMSgt (Ret) Cotten was an active member of the Twenty Plus Retirement Club, a nonprofit group whose members are retired military personnel serving the JBMDL community. He served the ABCO Federal Credit Union as a Board Member and was on the supervisory committee for more than 9 years. In addition, he served on the New Jersey Credit Union League Board of Directors for over 20 years and served on the Veteran's Advisory Committee.

CMSgt Cotten's military education includes: Basic Military Training

CMSgt Cotten's civilian education includes: Unknown.

CMSgt Cotten's military awards include: Air Force Commendation Medal (First Oak Leaf Cluster), Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, Air Force Good Conduct Medal, World War II Victory Medal, National Defense Service Medal, and Air Force Longevity Service Award (Four Oak Leaf Clusters).

CMSgt Cotten's civic awards, honors, and memberships include: Twenty Plus Retirement Club; ABCO Federal Credit Union Board Member and supervisory committee; and New Jersey Credit Union League Board of Directors.

CMSgt Cotten passed away at home, as he requested, on 14 August 2020 surrounded by his family, 75 years to the day he was inducted into the Army Air Corps. He was 93 years old. His sweetheart of 73 years, Mrs. Oteria Smith Cotten passed away a few short months later on 6 December 2020. They are interred at Brigadier General Doyle Veterans Cemetery, Arnetown, New Jersey. The two were inseparable from the time they were in high school. CMSgt and Mrs. Cotten are survived by ten children: Charen Cotten, Maple Shade, New Jersey; Lt Colonel (Ret) James M. Cotton, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Marlane Belford, Burlington, New Jersey; Wannetta Jolly, Alexandria, Virginia; Christina Scott; Willingboro, New Jersey; Terie Cotton, Willingboro, New Jersey; Arlene Hutton, Burlington, New Jersey; SMSgt (Ret) Dale A. Cotton, Pensacola, Florida; Kevin Cotton, Voorhees, New Jersey; Lauren Munn, Burlington, New Jersey; 16 grandchildren; 21 great-grandchildren; and two great-great grandchildren. New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy called Chief Cotten an "American Patriot".

"When I grew up, I knew nothing about airplanes. The spotlight was on us ... every time you turned around, there was another test for this, another test for that. We were considered to be elite personnel and that gave us a lot. If I was in another organization, I might not have been able to climb the ladder like I was able to. It's because I listened, I became educated and I feel as though as a result of that I had some really good moments in the military". ~Tuskegee Airman James Cotten

