



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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Mr. Samuel Wesley Henderson



Mr. Samuel Wesley Henderson was the eighth of eleven children born to Samuel Alexander Henderson and Ruth Rebecca (Waites Henderson) in New York City on February 1, 1921. His mother sparked a love of music early in his life, patiently teaching him to play the piano and later, signing him up for violin lessons with the venerable but exacting Bertram Knight, under whose tutelage his musical talent flourished. Mr. Henderson was equally attentive to his studies as a pupil in NYC's public school system, and in high school added athletics as yet another area in which he showed great promise. Five Black colleges had offered him basketball scholarships upon graduation from Stuyvesant High School, but Wesley decided instead to enroll in the Harlem Evening High School program for typing and stenography. It flabbergasted his parents but his decision later would prove to be a prescient one.

After completing those courses, still another opportunity presented itself. Olympic high jump gold medalist Dave Albritton was offering a four-year scholarship at State Teachers College (now Alabama State University) in Montgomery. Mr. Henderson accepted the scholarship but was not prepared for the intense racial hatred he would encounter. Twice escaping being lynched, he cut short his studies and returned to New York after only one semester. He was about to enroll at NYC College when World War II began. At that time, Blacks in the service were assigned to just three areas: as frontline foot soldiers (infantry units); delivering ammunition, food and supplies (quartermaster units); and building roads and bridges (engineering units). As fate would have it, one day he ran into a friend who was in a newly formed Black Air Force unit at Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois. When he heard that, he knew he wanted to become a Fighter Pilot and immediately went down to the recruiting center, where he was told that he could join the new unit if he volunteered. Wesley passed all mental and physical tests but failed the eye exam. He had a bruise on his eye from being hit by a snowball in his boyhood days. As a result, he couldn't be a Pilot after all with the injury but that didn't deter him; he joined the unit anyway. Two weeks later, he was in basic training at Camp Upton on Long Island. Thus began a period of his life that he proudly recalled as follows:

“They put us on a train, which I thought was headed to Illinois. In those days, you never knew your destination. The saying was, "Loose lips sink ships." I fell asleep, and when I woke up I was in Alabama again- at Chehaw Railroad Station. Our final destination? Tuskegee Army Airfield. I consoled myself by thinking that at least on the airfield I would not have to face racial prejudice, but it prevailed even there, even with a unit that was 85% Black and 15% White. I did KP (kitchen) and guard duty- at one time, guard duty four days in a row. One day, the 1st Sergeant said he needed someone who could type in the orderly room (Headquarters) of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. I volunteered. My typing and steno classes had paid off. After 2-months in the job, I told the 1st Sergeant that I should be promoted from Private to Private First Class. He submitted the required paperwork and 2nd Lt. George Spencer “Spanky” Roberts, the temporary Commanding Officer, approved the recommendation. At the end of the third month, I told the 1st Sergeant that I should be promoted to Corporal. Approved! Fourth month, Sergeant and the in the fifth month, there was an opening for Staff Sergeant. Approved again!

In 1942, Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. became the Commanding Officer of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. The following year, we received combat orders and were sent to Camp Shanks in New York. Normally it took 3-Squadrons to make a Fighter Group. My Squadron, the 99th, was the only Squadron that was prepared for combat duty. We became the 99th Fighter Squadron and boarded the SS Mariposa, an Italian steamship, for a 7-day journey to Casablanca, North Africa. We were attached to the 33rd Fighter Group and later, the 324th Fighter Group. The Commanding Officers of both Fighter Groups were horribly racist and gave the 99th Fighter Pilots the worst evaluations. Later we were detailed to the 79th Fighter Group in Sicily. Its Commanding Officer, Earl Bates, treated us like Gold. It was in Sicily that I got my final promotion to 1st Sergeant...the highest rank that could be achieved by Enlisted personnel. Colonel Davis went to Washington to protest the negative evaluations the 99th had received, though his Pilots had performed outstandingly. There were rumors that our Fighter Squadron would be dismantled and the Pilots assigned to coastal duty. But Colonel Davis prevailed. When he returned from Washington, he not only brought with him the all-Black 332nd Fighter Group, but brand-new P-51s, the fastest and best fighter planes, for all the Pilots. We painted the tails of the planes Red, so they could be distinguished. We became known as the Red Tails, and the 99th Fighter Squadron became part of the 332nd Fighter Group, assigned to Bomber escort duty. Soon Bomber Pilots began to request the Red Tails because of our loyalty and fierce protection of their planes. We never lost a single plane to enemy aircraft. The Chaplain of the 332nd complained that the 99th soldiers did nothing to support Sunday morning services. I decided to form a choral group to sing during a service. Six singers attended my first rehearsal. Many were asked to join, but they retorted that they were there to fight a war, not sing. The music "Stars of a Summer Night." Three days later, at the second rehearsal, there were 12 singers. The third rehearsal produced 16 men. A month later, I had a full group - five first tenors, seven second tenors, eight baritones, and seven basses. On 90% of the occasions we had no piano. I typed out the words and sang each part to the group myself. The sound was gorgeous. Requests started coming in for us to sing off-post. We became quite famous as the 99th Fighter Squadron Chorale group."

On his last day in Europe, 1st Sergeant Henderson was awarded the Bronze Star for administrative excellence. Colonel Davis was appointed Commanding Officer at Godman Airfield in Hardin County, Kentucky. He took about 50 people, including 1st Sergeant Henderson, with him. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, by the U.S. brought WWII to a quick end. Mr. Henderson was honorably discharged at Fort Dix, NJ, and returned home. He had served his country for three and a half years.

Back on home turf in NYC, Mr. Henderson began studying voice with Prof. H. Lawrence Freeman. He became the conductor of the Lyceum Choral Group at Salem United Methodist Church in Harlem for 13 years, after Luvenia White Porter left to become the minister of music at another church. Mr. Henderson sang baritone at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Harlem for many years and gained a well-deserved reputation as an excellent sight reader and fine Musician. He continued his choral conducting, singing with various church choirs and recording sessions. In addition to pursuing his varied musical activities, Mr. Henderson was employed by the United States Postal Service for almost 33 years, retiring in 1979 at Grade 26.

Mr. Henderson was a member of St Michael's Church; Life Member of the NAACP; Chaplain of the 369th Sergeants Association; Parliamentarian of the Claude Govan Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc.; Parliamentarian and former President of the David I. Martin Music Guild Chapter of the National Association of Negro Musicians; former Vice Chairman of the Eastern Region of the National Association of Negro Musicians; Life Member of the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees; member of the National Association of Postal Supervisors; and member of the American Postal Workers Union.

In 2005, Mr. Henderson and 8-other Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen were invited by filmmaker George Lucas to his Skywalker Ranch to talk about their exploits during WWII. Lucas produced the critically acclaimed Red Tails movie. Mr. Henderson was credited for his contribution to the making of the film. Of his remarkable life Mr. Henderson humbly said, "Whatever success I have had is due to God's grace and loving family and friends."

To learn more about Mr. Samuel Wesley Henderson, other Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen, please visit the Website at the following location: www.TuskegeeAirmen.org.

