

BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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

DR. VANCE HUNTER MARCHBANKS



Vance Hunter Marchbanks, Jr., was born 12 January 1905 at Fort Washakie, Wyoming to Captain Vance H. Marchbanks, Sr. and Callie Flatton Marchbanks. His Father was a Buffalo Soldier, serving in the Army for 43 years during the Spanish-American War and World War I. His Father retired in 1939 as a Captain. Due to his Father's military service, Vance was educated in Essex Junction, Vermont; Chicago, Illinois; Washington, D.C; and finally, Nashville, Tennessee. As a child, his medical passion came from operating on cherries in his backyard. He would cut them open, remove the pits, and sew the incision shut. He graduated from High School in 1923 from Tennessee State Normal School, Nashville, TN.

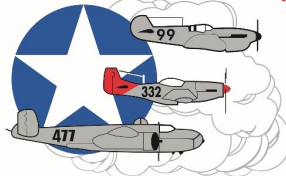


Upon graduation from High School, Vance entered the University of Arizona in 1927 where he was met with discrimination. He was not permitted to live on campus in the dormitories or participate in activities so he lived off campus in a boarding house. He was relegated to eating at a restaurant at the train station and having to use the back door to enter the restaurant. He was often harassed and bugs were found in his soup. During his Sophomore year, he applied for an appointment to West Point from then President, Calvin Coolidge. He received the appointment. In 1926, Vance was rejected by examiners in El Paso, Texas and when he reapplied in San Francisco, California, he was rejected due to age. Vance continued

his education and in 1931, he graduated from the University of Arizona. He furthered his education and in 1937 and received his Medical Degree from Howard University's College of Medicine, Washington, DC. Dr. Marchbanks completed his internship and residency at Freedman's Hospital (Howard University) serving as an Assistant Resident.

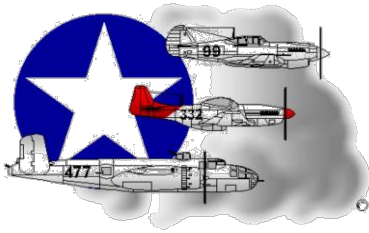
In 1939, Dr. Marchbanks finally received his Officer Commission as a First Lieutenant, Medical Corps Officer, in the Army Reserves. He joined the medical staff at the Veterans Affairs Hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama, which was a hospital for medical care of African-Americans. In 1940, the 3rd Military Area Headquarters in New Orleans, Louisiana issued a request for Reserve Medical Corps Officers in the southeast to receive active-duty training. When Dr. Marchbanks volunteered, he was turned down all the way up the chain of command due to "limited training facilities for colored Reserve officers." Dr. Marchbanks did not accept being turned down. He contacted a friend at Howard University's School of Law, Assistant Dean Charles H. Houston. Attorney Houston was Legal Counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Dr. Marchbanks' Father also wrote to Attorney Houston in support of his son's desire to be more involved in military service as well as other African-American Physicians. Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. did not want Dr. Marchbanks to publicly react to the situation. Dr. Marchbanks continued to persist in his quest for active duty and on 15 April 1941, he was assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina as the Battalion Surgeon for the 16th Battalion, 5th Regiment, Field Artillery Replacement Training Center instead of the assignment he requested to Tuskegee Army Airfield. He

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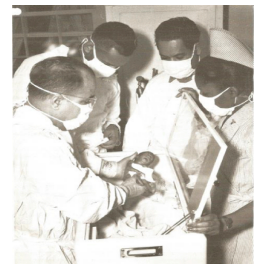
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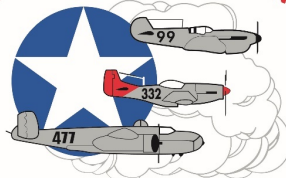
performed outpatient medical care similar to a Flight Surgeon serving in a Flying squadron. By September 1941, he was relocated to the Fort Bragg Station Hospital as the Section II Ward Officer providing inpatient care. He remained in that position until the spring of 1942 and was reassigned to Tuskegee, Alabama. Before going to his new assignment, he travelled to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, DC, from 1 May 1942 to 1 June 1942, for a course in military Neuropsychiatry. Once reaching Tuskegee, AL, Dr. Marchbanks was assigned to the 66th Field Training Detachment, Tuskegee Army Air Field Flying School, caring for Pilots and Cadets. Dr. Marchbanks voluntarily took the School of Aviation Medicine extension course to become an Aviation Medical Examiner (AME). Prior to the Tuskegee Airmen Program, all Army Flight Surgeons were White. Although little information existed historically with regard to African American Flight Surgeons, there were at least three at Tuskegee Army Air Field: Dr. Vance H. Marchbanks, Jr.; Dr. Maurice C. Johnson; and Dr. James P. Ramsey at the beginning of the war.

On 16 January 1943, Dr. Marchbanks was promoted to the rank of Captain and on 26 August 1943, he was reassigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, Tuskegee Army Air Field. Leaving his family at Tuskegee Army Air Field, Dr. Marchbanks transferred to Selfridge Army Air Field, Michigan as the 301st Fighter Squadron Flight Surgeon and later, the Flight Surgeon for the 302nd Fighter Squadron. On 11 December 1943, Dr. Marchbanks became Group Surgeon, 332nd Group Headquarters. On Christmas Eve, Dr. Marchbanks travelled by train to Fort Patrick Henry near Hampton, Virginia. Mrs. Marchbanks travelled by train to Virginia from her home in Tuskegee, AL while Dr. Marchbanks, and other 332nd members, awaited orders to leave for Italy. Confined to the base, Dr. and Mrs. Marchbanks could only say their goodbyes at night talking through the perimeter fence. Dr. Marchbanks left for Italy in 1944 and they would not see one another again until July 1945. Dr. Marchbanks was one of six Flight Surgeons to see combat in the Mediterranean, sometimes under attack by the enemy. Dr. Marchbanks also saw combat in Sicily and North Africa.

After returning from the war's end in 1945, Dr. Marchbanks was stationed at Lockbourne Army Air Base, Ohio, where there was an expectant mother. Nurse Nancy Leftenant kept telling doctors that the baby was coming. The local "Whites Only Hospital" would not allow the Black woman to give birth there, so Dr. Marchbanks delivered the baby with assistance from Nurse Leftenant. The baby, a girl, who was premature, was not expected to live. The baby was breach and suffering from a vitamin K deficiency. Nurse Leftenant gave the baby Vitamin K while Dr. Marchbanks constructed an apparatus similar to an incubator for the baby. They saved the baby's life. [Photo: 1946 at Lockbourne Army Air Base. Premature baby girl born at Lockbourne AAB Hospital. L to R: Dr. Marchbanks, Dr. Edward Cooper, Dr, Arelious King, and nurse Nancy Leftenant.]

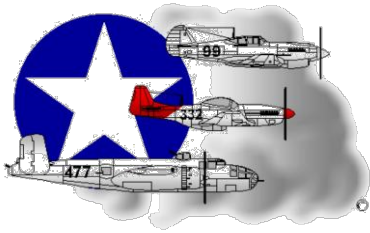


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As the U.S. embarked on the Korean War, Dr. Marchbanks continued his aviation career, gaining additional experience in aviation medicine. He accrued 1,900 flight hours in prop and jet aircrafts, while gathering medical data that was published in military and research manuals. To study aircrew fatigue, Dr. Marchbanks participated in a 10,600, mile nonstop flight in a B-52 Bomber between Florida, Argentina, and then the flight culminated in New York in 1957. Through data collected by Dr. Marchbanks, it was determined from his studies that physical fatigue came about due to the adrenal hormone content in the blood and tissue of aircrew members which indicated that the fatigue exhibited by aircrew members often occurred before a fatal crash.

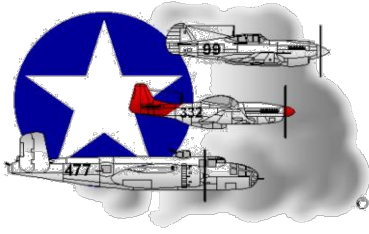
Dr. Marchbanks was assigned to the Project Mercury Space Program in 1960. He was the Head Physician due to his military service and rating as a Chief Flight Surgeon, which required 15 years on flying status and 1,500 flying hours. To prepare for his new position, Dr. Marchbanks studied each Astronauts medical history, attended aerospace lectures and visited space flight tracking stations. In 1962, Dr. Marchbanks was a member of an 11-man NASA team at a tracking station in Kano, Nigeria. His job was to monitor the medical status and health conditions of Astronaut John Glenn, the first American to orbit Earth, during his Mercury flight. Dr. Marchbanks monitored the temperature, pulse, respiration, and heart through monitors attached to Astronaut Glenn and was able to compare preflight test results with those he monitored while Astronaut Glenn was in space. After his stint with NASA, Dr. Marchbanks became Head of a Hospital at an Air Force Base in California. After retiring from the Air Force in 1964 as a Colonel and Chief Flight Surgeon, Dr. Marchbanks worked in private industry for Hamilton Standard in Hartford, Connecticut developing Life Support Systems for NASA's Apollo program. He oversaw medical testing of the Moon Suit and Backpack that were eventually used in the Apollo space missions. Dr. Marchbanks also contributed research to the Air Force about Sickle Cell Anemia and his pioneering study of the disease led to the inclusion of more Blacks Pilots and Astronauts. The results of his 3-year research study ended a long-standing screening for Sickle Cell Trait that, if present, resulted in men being discharged from the military. His research helped convince Military Leaders that having the Trait did not mean a person developed the disease.



Dr. Marchbanks' Military Education: Neuropsychiatry course, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, DC, 1 May 1942 to 1 June 1942; Army Air Corps School in Aerospace Medicine; School of Aviation Medicine extension course, 19 December 1942 (first black Air Force Surgeon and Space Medical Pioneer).

Dr. Marchbanks' Civilian Education includes: Bachelor of Science degree, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 1931; and Medical Degree, Howard University Medical School, Washington, D.C, 1937.





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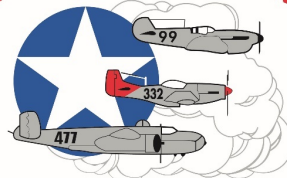
Dr. Marchbanks' Military Awards include: Bronze Star Medal; Air Force Commendation Medal, 1st Oak Leaf Cluster, both Medals for Research; and the Army Commendation Medal.

Dr. Marchbanks' Civic Awards, Memberships, and Honors include: Aerospace Medical Association; "Marchbanks Lane" on Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, Washington, D.C., is named in honor of Colonel/Dr. Vance H. Marchbanks, the 1st Black Air Force Surgeon and Space Medical Pioneer and the Vance Marchbanks Award for Excellence in Aerospace Medicine.

Dr. Marchbanks' Inventions/Discoveries: Gas Mask Testing Device used to measure Aircrew fatigue and he discovered that the Sickie Cell Trait did not mean a person could develop Sickie Cell Anemia.

Dr. Marchbanks died 21 October 1988 in Hartford, CT. He was 83 years old. His wife, Lois Gilkey Marchbanks, died 7 July 2014. She was 98 years old. They are buried at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Arlington County, VA, Plot: Section 3, Site 1677-C-1, Memorial ID: 54192480. They are survived by a Daughter Joy Boddie and grandchildren Brian Radcliffe Robinson and Elizabeth Hunter Gunn. Their Daughter Roslyn Marchbanks Robinson died 1 September 2019.

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