

BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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DR. FENTON BERTRUM SANDS, SR. 1918 - 1998



1st Lt Fenton B. Sands, 1944

It may seem unusual that a kid from the urban metropolis of New York City would emerge as an international agricultural expert, but original Tuskegee Airman Dr. Fenton Sands did just that, and much more. He would grow up to leave those crowded city streets for an Ivy League college, serve his country, and go on to dedicate his post-war civilian career to people all over the world. Like other inspirational Tuskegee Airmen, Sands has left his mark on history.

Although Sands was born in Harlem in 1918, his family originally emigrated to the U.S. from the Bahamas to find better opportunities for work and education. The sentiment “Get an education!” ran strong in their family. The children knew that, no matter what, this was their path forward. Sands hit that first milestone in 1936, graduating from Stuyvesant High School, one of the best high schools in New York City at the time. Now called Jackie Robinson Park, Sands was inspired by Colonial Park, 10 blocks of open space in Harlem that sparked his curious nature. Growing up across the street from this gem where city met nature, his love for science took root, eventually leading him to Cornell University to study agriculture. He defied the odds by being a black man from the big city majoring in agriculture at a predominantly white college in rural America.

While at Cornell, he studied hard, learned to farm, worked for a power company, and became the first black member and resident of the now-famous Telluride House. Still in existence today, the Telluride House is a unique community of Cornell scholars of undergraduate, graduate and faculty status who are passionate about intellectual engagement, democratic self-governance, and community living. Within this setting, Sands was afforded a rich and intense academic experience and means of paying for his education. He graduated in 1942 with a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture. He was the first in his family to earn a college degree.

While still at Cornell, Sands applied to the U.S. Army Air Corps’ new flight training program for black men because of his interest in aviation. In June of 1942, Sands passed the examination needed to qualify as a Cadet in the Air Corps to the great delight and pride of his entire family. By December he was assigned to pre-flight training at the Army Air Force Advanced Flying Training School in Tuskegee, Alabama and his future in aviation was set in motion.

DOTA Fenton B. Sands, Sr. is listed on page #223 of the official DOTA Ted Johnson 2002 Database



Members of the Nation's first Negro Navigation Cadets, who received their commissions into the Army Air Forces on February 26th, 1944. They visited New York City as guests of Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia. They are shown here on the steps of City Hall.



Dr. Sands became an international tropical agricultural expert who worked all over the world. Picture below is in South Sudan, 1960



As a cadet, Sands was a part of the now iconic picture (to the left) with then New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia with the first class of black aviation navigation cadets who would go on to fly on B-25 bombers. The group was heralded on this historic visit to New York and many flocked to see them in a parade, amazed at the prospect of black Americans flying aircraft in the war effort. Sands was commissioned as an officer in February of 1944. By June he completed bombardier training, then earned his wings for navigation, navigator, aerial gunner, and aircraft observer. He was eventually assigned to the 477th Bombardment Group, becoming a member of a unique, select group of navigators-bombardiers, the first of their kind in the military. The war ended before the 477th was deployed overseas so Sands was honorably discharged in December of 1945. Shortly thereafter, he married his childhood sweetheart, Dorothy Holder. The two moved to Africa in 1946, working in Liberia to help re-open and revitalize the Episcopal Church-run Cuttington College. Sands designed the new campus grounds, helped with managing construction, and developed the school's first agricultural farm and educational programs. During that time, the first two of their three children were born.

Sands and his family returned to the States so he could pursue his doctorate degree. In 1954, he graduated from Cornell once again, this time with a PhD in Agriculture. With their third child born during this time, the growing family once again returned to Africa where Sands served as Cuttington's Vice President and Director of Agriculture. Dorothy Sands served on the faculty as head of the Home Economics Department. Later Sands would go on to take an assignment in Nigeria and his family accompanied him. His important work in agriculture expanded to work in 24 foreign countries with such organizations as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Ford Foundation, and the World Bank. He lived and/or served in countries such as South Sudan, Sudan, Egypt, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Columbia, the Virgin Islands, Morocco, Tunisia, Madagascar, Greece, South Yemen, North Yemen, Oman, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines. He retired from the World Bank in 1982.

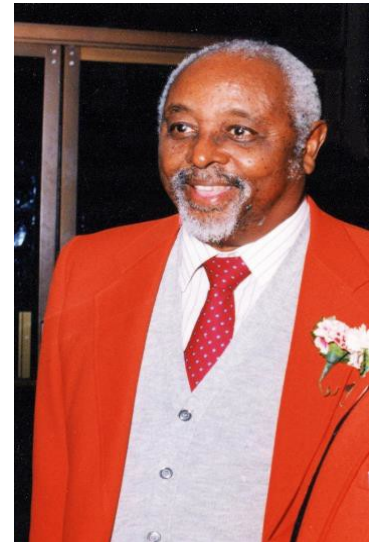


Sands in 1997 at the Black History Month Tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen in Cairo, Egypt

Dr. and Mrs. Sands continued to explore and travel the world in their retirement and joined several civic organizations. He was a regularly active member of the General Daniel “Chappie” James Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., mentoring young people through his inspirational military service and civilian career experience. He received an Outstanding Alumni Award from Cornell in 1991. The year before Sands passed away in 1998, he was the guest of honor at a gala Black History Month tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen in Cairo, Egypt where his son worked at the time. This large gathering drew 40+ black members of the U.S. Armed Forces stationed far away in the Sinai desert and who reveled in

he opportunity to meet an Original Tuskegee Airman.

His life’s work and commitment to education inspired all three of his children and seven grandchildren to attend college. For example, in the Sands second generation, Fenton Sands, Jr. inherited part of his gypsy-lifestyle from his parents. He first followed in his father’s footsteps by earning a degree in agricultural economics from Cornell University and a doctorate from Michigan State University. Then he embarked on a USAID career-odyssey for over 25 years, living and working in six countries and Washington, DC. Now, there’s a third generation of the Sands family in USAID (Sands, Jr’s son, Jahmal) as a result of Sands Sr.’s influence. The youngest of Fenton and Dorothy’s children, Renee Malentin (a professional nurse) also spent a short time overseas with her family (husband and 2 children) in Kenya. The oldest daughter, Doy (retired teacher), married Lt. Colonel Benjamin L. Wilds, now a retired USAF physician. They also lived a few years overseas with their 3 children during his career.



Sands was an officer in the General Daniel “Chappie” James Chapter

Sands Sr.’s legacy will continue through the family donation of his wings and navigation dead reckoning computer to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. The family is happy to share them with the world to honor all the great Tuskegee Airmen.



Sands (left in 1992) in front of a B-25 bomber in which he was the navigator-bombardier, and with part of his crew (right) while on active duty.

