



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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Mr. William Morris Wheeler



William (Bill) Wheeler was born August 20, 1923. He was raised and attended public schools in Detroit, MI. After graduating from Northwestern High School, he attended Howard University in Washington, DC. During World War II, he volunteered to become a U.S. Army Air Corps Pilot, and was inducted into the service in March 1943, during his Sophomore year. Completing Basic Training at Keesler Field, MS, he was transferred to Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF), AL, to begin Flight Training as an Aviation Cadet. There, he quickly learned to fly the Piper Cub L-2, the Stearman PT-17, the Vultee Valiant BT-13, and the North American AT-6 Texan. He earned his Fighter Pilot Wings in March 1944, and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant at TAAF.

LT Wheeler began Combat Fighter training in the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk at Tuskegee. He completed combat training at Walterboro Army Air Corps Base, SC, in the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. At Eglin Army Air Corps Base, FL, he completed dive-bombing, aerial gunnery and ground gunnery training in the P-47. On football trips to play other colleges while at Howard U. and, as a Cadet and Officer in the Air Corps, LT Wheeler encountered discrimination everywhere, even in our Nation's Capital. He was extremely aggravated by White superior Officers who imposed their own segregation and discrimination regulations, including preventing Black Officers from entering Officers' Clubs. He fought and resisted such regulations, continuously, and tore down signs forcing blacks to sit in the backs of buses and allowing White passengers to sit first. This resulted in his unjustified arrest on two occasions as well as FBI scrutiny, interrogations and psychological exams to evaluate his sanity. Naturally, he was found to be sane.

In August 1944, LT Wheeler was assigned to Ramitelli Air Base, Italy, as a replacement Pilot for the 332nd Fighter Group. He qualified in the N. American P-51 D Mustang fighter and flew combat missions to Germany, Austria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Albania and Greece, escorting Allied Bombers and strafing enemy troops, vehicles and airfields. He was credited with destroying three bombers on strafing missions: two Heinkel HE-111s and a Junkers JU-52. On his last mission, LT Wheeler suffered from hypoxia (lack of oxygen) and lost consciousness at 36,000 feet over Germany. He spun down, out of control, until he regained consciousness and recovered, at 8,000 feet. Miraculously, he was able to return safely to his home base despite being alone and vulnerable to enemy aircraft.

LT Wheeler's combat awards and decorations include: the Air Medal, European/African/Middle Eastern Theater Campaign Medal, American Campaign Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Victory Medal WWII, New York State Conspicuous Service Cross, Village of Hempstead Medal of Honor, Victory in Europe



Commemorative Medal, O-Day Commemorative Medal and the Group Congressional Gold Medal. LT Wheeler was honorably discharged in August 1945. To his great disappointment, when LT Wheeler returned to the U.S. in August 1945, he found that segregation and discrimination still prevailed in this country. He tried to become a Commercial Airlines Pilot-Trainee, along with other returned Tuskegee Airmen Pilots. They were denied placement as Pilot-Trainees; however, they were offered jobs cleaning airplanes, which they vehemently rejected.



In November 1945, Bill married Minnie Esther Jenkins, whom he had met in August of that year—a classic example of: "Love at First Sight!" Shortly thereafter, he was hired by Data Digests, Inc., a major international, financial publishing company, as Assistant Production Manager. He later became Vice President of Production & Distribution for all publications.



In 1972, Bill was employed by Fairchild Republic Company (manufacturer of the P-47 Thunderbolt he had flown) as a Methods and Procedures Analyst on the A-10 Warthog and Space Shuttle projects. In 1975, he was offered the position of Corporate Affirmative Action Officer. However, he declined the offer because top executives imposed unacceptable racial limitations and pre-conditions on the functions of the position. In 1977, he was hired by National Bank of North America and its successor, National Westminster Bank (absorbed by Fleet Bank and later by Bank of America), as Assistant Vice President/Purchasing Manager. He eventually became Vice President/Director of Purchasing, Printing, Central Supply and Distribution. He officially retired in 2001.

Bill was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen's Speakers Bureau, making presentations, nationally and internationally to: Universities/Colleges, Public/Private Schools, Corporations, Churches, various Associations, Governmental and Civilian Non-profit Agencies, Government and Civilian Contractors and Museums. When he presented to students, he always urged them to: "STAY IN SCHOOL, IF YOU WANT TO BE COMPETITIVE AND SUCCESSFUL IN THIS COUNTRY!" He also told them: "A College Degree - preferably a Ph.D. - is your Passport to Success!!"

Bill participated in Special Venues, including Air Shows, Commemorative Events, Historical Celebrations, Documentary Films, TV, Radio, and made personal appearances. He was a member of American Legion Aviators' Post 743, a world-wide post devoted exclusively to military Pilots, Navigators, Bombardiers and Flying Aircrews. He was also a member of the NMCP and the Southern Poverty Law Center. In February 2005, Bill was the Keynote Speaker at Tuskegee University's Annual Tuskegee Airmen's Convocation and the recipient of the prestigious "Distinguished-Achievement Award" from Tuskegee University's President, Benjamin F. Payton. In February 2006, he was also awarded an Honorary Doctorate Degree by Dr. Payton.

In May 2006, Dr. Wheeler was selected by the exclusive American Legion Aviator's Post to represent the Post at Graduation Ceremonies at The U. S. Air Force Academy, in Colorado Springs, CO, where he made award presentations to the Cadet Commanders. On November 10, 2006, he was one of the Tuskegee Airmen who attended a luncheon and received a detailed Iraq War status briefing at the Pentagon from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his staff. They were also given a detailed tour of the Pentagon. The next morning, they shared breakfast at The White House with President George W. Bush, followed by individual photo-op sessions with him. On March 29, 2007, all Original Tuskegee Airmen/Women were awarded The Congressional Gold



Medal, this country's highest Congressional Award, by Congress and President George W. Bush, at a gala ceremony at the Capitol Rotunda. On May 28, 2009, Dr. Wheeler was awarded another Honorary Doctorate Degree at Lehman College's 2009 Graduation Ceremony by its President, Dr. Ricardo R. Fernandez.

Dr. Wheeler became a widower on December 22, 2004, with the sudden and very tragic loss of his wonderful, beloved wife Minnie. She was struck by a car in Hempstead, after attending an Executive School Board Meeting at Town Hall. He passed away on July 19, 2011. Surviving him are his loving children Cameron Courtney, Derek Chandler and Scott Rickey; his sister-in-law Betty Ann Wheeler; his daughters-in-law Marianne Wheeler and Adrienne Dorsey Wheeler, his three beloved grand-children Fidelia Wheeler, William Wheeler III and Jason Hirsch; one great grandchild Joshua Noel Wheeler; nieces and nephews Robert Jenkins, Craig Wheeler, Renee Wheeler-Moore, Lawrence A. Muhammad, Cynthia A. Rice, William C. Coleman III, Melody Jenkins, Wondra Rosado, Roana Torres, Cheryl Bell, William Jefferson, Karen Wiley, Joyce Brickhouse, Keith Bulle, Karen Ferguson and their families.



To learn more about LT/Dr. William Wheeler, other Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen, please visit the Website at the following location: www.TuskegeeAirmen.org.



