



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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LT/DR. CALVIN J. SPANN, SR.



First Lieutenant/Doctor Calvin J. Spann is a Documented Original Tuskegee Airman. He was born November 28, 1924, in Rutherford, New Jersey. He was the eldest Son with one Brother and four Sisters born to the union of Joseph and Rebecca (Richardson) Spann. As a youngster, Calvin grew up in the shadow of NJ's Teterboro Airport, located approximately 12-miles from midtown Manhattan, New York. He was fascinated by the coming and going of aircrafts from the Airport. In those days, it only cost a dollar to get a ride with one of the barnstormers operating out of

Teterboro Airport, but it was a dollar the Spann Family did not have.

In 1940, Calvin attended Rutherford High School, Rutherford, NJ. He was a Golden Gloves Boxing Champion at age 16. His strongest subjects in school were Math and Science. In his Senior year, Calvin's Father died. As the oldest male in the Family, and to help his Mother, he quickly found a job and every penny he made went to providing food for the Family.

Calvin really wanted to be a Pilot. He took an Enlistment Exam, basically, a two-year college exam that was heavy in Science and Math. He passed the test and found himself needing his Mother's permission to enlist. In reflection, he quoted his Mother as saying, "Son, if that's what you want to do, go ahead and I'll pray for you." At age 17, and one month before his High School's graduation date, Calvin was called to serve in the U.S. Army Air Corps (USAAC) and left Rutherford, NJ, in 1943 to join the war effort. He boarded a train bound for Aviation Training at Keesler Field, Mississippi. Carolyn, his Sister, attended his High School graduation and was there to accept his Diploma in his absence.

With Mr. Spann's arrival on Orders to USAAC's Aviation Cadet Training office, Kessler Field, MS, to begin his training, he was informed that the Army Air Corps did not train Black Cadets. Upon



reflection of that MS experience, LT Spann was quoted as saying during one of hundreds of interviews that “When I got to Biloxi, MS, they said, we don't train any Black Cadets here! They put me up in the GI housing and they didn't give me a uniform for two weeks. Then Orders came through sending me on to Tuskegee, Alabama where they were training Black Cadets. This was all brand new to me because I had never been out of the state of New Jersey prior to that and didn't know anything about the USAAC's segregation policies.” LT Spann later surmised that when he passed the Enlistment Exam that Administrators filing his paperwork in Newark, NJ, assumed he was not Black and created Orders for him to go to Mississippi for Aviation Cadet Training.



After arriving in Tuskegee, AL, Mr. Spann started his Aviation Cadet Training in 1943. At the completion of training, 2D LT Spann received his Officer Commissioning and Silver Wings from the Tuskegee Flight School as a part of the graduating class of 44-G. Before he departed Alabama, he had the opportunity to take his Sister (Carolyn) up in his aircraft. She was a member of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) program and LT Spann was very proud of her. She was the only person in the Spann Family that he had the opportunity to take up in the air. LT Spann frequently raved about CAP in his many speeches.

After graduation, LT Spann was reassigned to Walterboro, South Carolina. He trained in the P-47 (Thunderbolt) for combat and an overseas duty assignment. At the completion of his training in 1944, he was sent to Ramitelli, Italy, as a replacement Combat Pilot. He was given an Instruction Manual on how to fly the P-51 Mustang. He became a member of the 100th Fighter Pursuit Squadron, 332^d Fighter Group, under the command of COLONEL Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Again, during one of many interviews, LT Spann was quoted as saying the following about his military experience: “In the U.S., Jim Crow Laws mandated racial segregation. Even the military was segregated. There was a lot of name-calling but the U.S. Pilots flying Bombers had their own special name for the skilled Black Fighter Pilots escorting the dangerous missions. They called the Tuskegee Airmen "Red-Tail Angels" because of the Red Tails on the P-51 Mustangs and the tenacity with which we went after the German Fighter Pilots attacking our Bombers.” The Germans introduced the first Jet-Powered Fighter Aircraft in aerial warfare.

In his combat experience, LT Spann recalled the first time he saw the German Messerschmitt Jet aircraft bearing down on one of his bombers as follows: “Orders forbade us leaving our assigned spots in-formation, but me and Captain Roscoe Brown went after the Jet as it circled back at the



Bombers. The Messerschmitt was just like a big, fast car and it took a lot of room to turn. Our P-51 Mustang was smaller and more maneuverable, and we cut inside the Messerschmitt's circle back to our Bombers and cut loose with the guns." He jokingly described his flying mission as: "That first ride was a thrill, even for a young crazy guy. And believe it or not, I didn't think my missions were scary because we were trained to feel that if something was going to happen, it would be to the other guy, not you. Prayer has always been in the forefront of what I have tried to do. Yes, truly...On a Wing and a Prayer." And as doggedly as the Red Tails protected the Bombers, and as much as any Pilot longed for the credited "kill" that sent an enemy aircraft spiraling to the ground in flames, LT Spann stated that "several Pilots did not want to kill other Pilots. After all, they were also skilled professionals and their Mothers were home praying for them, too." LT Spann was a witness to Capt Brown's bullets riddling the German Jet aircraft and Capt Brown told him later that he saw the Pilot parachute out of his aircraft. Capt Brown was credited with a kill.

Prior to the War's end in Europe, and LT Spann completing his tour of duty in Italy, he flew a total of 26-combat missions. He distinguished himself while serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps, 100th Fighter Squadron, 332nd Fighter Group and received several military awards. After returning to the United States, LT Spann was stationed at Lockbourne Army Air Base, Columbus, Ohio. He Separated from active duty in 1946 and remained in the Air Force Reserves for 15-years. Because of his Math and Sciences strengths in school, LT Spann worked in Pharmaceutical Sales as a Civilian and Reservist, taking the job only after his applications to fly commercial planes were continuously found unacceptable. On this topic, he was quoted in an interview as stating, "I was trying to go to school at nights and work during the day. I could not afford to spend the weekends trying to get a plane and then not even get one. The Reserves did not allocate enough planes for people to get their flying time in and Pilots had to fly at least four hours a month to qualify for flight pay. Not getting a chance to fly, I decided to get a Discharge." His Discharge was effective in 1961.

LT Spann's Military Education: USAAC Cadet Aviation Program

LT Spann's Military Awards: Air Medal with one oak leaf cluster, a Presidential Unit Citation, and the Mediterranean Theatre of Operation ribbon. In addition, he earned the American Theatre and World War II Victory button.

Like many of LT Spann's Tuskegee Airmen comrades that he served side-by-side with in training and wartime scenarios, he continued to dream of going on to become a Commercial Pilot; but one singular factor always stood in his and their way despite making several attempts to seek employment with the commercial airlines...they were not hiring Black Pilots due to racial discrimination practices and policies in effect at that time.



During one of his speeches, he stoically stared into the audience and was quoted as saying, "That was one of the most disappointing things in my career. I thought I was one of the best Pilots, but I could not get a job in that profession because of the color of my skin. I just try to forget that period. They had the same discrimination policy against women too. But I've seen big changes since those days and I'm proud to say I lived through some of those great changes that made this country the great country it is today." After 1961, and because of a Civil Rights lawsuit, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling forced major commercial airlines to hire Blacks as Pilots in 1963. At nearly 40 years old, it was too late for his Pilot career, but he was glad to see the desegregation practice in commercial aviation occur.

After a life-long residency in NJ, LT Spann moved from Englewood, NJ to Allen, Texas to be closer to his 2-grandsons. He (as a Civilian) joined many other Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen on numerous U.S. stages to discuss their WW II combat experiences as Tuskegee Airmen and the Civil Rights challenges they faced while in the military and afterwards. Most notably, he really savored opportunities to talk with Youths about the importance of an education. He stressed to Youths and Adult audiences alike in church, schools, businesses, etc., the importance of excelling in math and science and where it could take them in their lives and careers and how focuses on Excellence, Preparation and Prayer played pivotal roles in he and the Tuskegee Airmen achieving their combat mission goals. In May 2006, LT/Dr. Spann received an Honorary Doctorate Degree from Tuskegee University in Public Service. Following is a link to one of LT/Dr. Spann's many speeches to a large audience in Allen, Texas:
<http://allentx.swagit.com/play/07222011-26>



Prior to LT/Dr. Calvin Spann receiving his Honorary Doctorate Degree from Tuskegee University, the United States Congress also approved a bill in February 2006, sponsored by Rep. Charles B. Rangel (Democrat-NY), to honor the Tuskegee Airmen with the Congressional Gold Medal. On March 27, 2006, the United States Senate passed legislation, sponsored by Sen. Carl Levin (Democrat-MI), authorizing President Bush to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the Tuskegee Airmen. One year and two-days later, the Congressional Gold Medal was awarded to the Tuskegee Airmen on March 29, 2007, in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C.

LT Spann's Civilian Education: High School Diploma, Rutherford, NJ; Newark College of Engineering (now known as NJIT - New Jersey Institute of Technology), Newark, NJ; Business School and Real Estate Broker License.



LT Spann's Civic Awards: 2006 – recipient of Tuskegee University Honorary Doctorate Degree in Public Service; 2007 – collective unit recipient of the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal; New Jersey Aviation Hall of Fame Inductee; Texas Aviation Hall of Fame Inductee; White House Invitee of President Barack Obama and other Tuskegee Airmen, and their families, for a Veterans' Day event.

On September 6, 2015, LT/Dr. Calvin J. Spann passed away. Surviving him are his 2-Daughters (Dr. Carla Spann and Gia Spann) with his previous wife and a Son with his Widow, Gwenelle Spann, (Calvin Spann II), and Grandchildren (Carson, Cameron and Olivia). In the summer of 2015, LT/Dr. Spann was blessed to travel to NY to hold his granddaughter, Olivia, for the first time. She was only 3-months old when he passed away. He was preceded in death by his Parents (Joseph and Rebecca Spann) and 5-Siblings (Pearline, Ada, Anna, Carolyn and Joseph).

