



# BIOGRAPHY

## A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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## Major John O. Cunningham



The Cunningham Legacy all began when Major John O. Cunningham was drafted into the Army in 1941, after he completed one year of college. As an African American, in a segregated country and a segregated military, Maj. Cunningham came in as an enlisted man and soon grew to be a Surveyor in the US Army. Having had one year of college gave him an advantage when the need for Pilots came up in his area. Maj. Cunningham's Pilot training was a different kind than the famous Red Tail Fighter Pilots also being trained in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Maj. Cunningham's enlisted assignment had been in Michigan. Soon, there was a need in the US Army for Liaison/Forward Observation Pilots. These Pilots would have the job of flying out over different areas and locating the enemy and directing artillery cannon fire toward them. You see, artillery by itself was ineffective. There was always the need for 'eyes in the field' to find the enemy, either from the ground or by air, and for the cannon fire to be directed upon them. Maj. Cunningham was trained to locate the enemy and to direct the artillery fire from the air.

From August to November 1942, Maj. Cunningham was transferred to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS). From August to November 1943, he attended Basic Flight training in Tuskegee, Alabama. This gave him the official title of an Original Tuskegee

Airman Maj. Cunningham returned to spend 2 months in Field Artillery School in Fort Sill, before going into combat against the Japanese in the South Pacific. He was assigned to the 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (segregated), 594<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion (also segregated). It was here where Maj. Cunningham was awarded the Air Medal in 1945 for his part in the liberation of the Southern Philippine Islands. Maj. Cunningham also received the Good Conduct Medal, WW II Victory Medal as well as a Philippine Island Presidential Unit Citation. All of this was done within a segregated military.

Maj. Cunningham exited the Army in December 1945. He soon returned to the Army, as an enlisted man. (The Army no longer had the need for pilots and officers). By this time, he was married in Indiana and opted to bring his bride to Occupied Japan with him, where his son, David, was born in 1949. In 1951, the Korean War flared up and Maj. Cunningham was once again called up to be an officer and pilot to assist in the war effort in Korea. The Korean War was the first war where the military was not segregated. President Truman's Presidential Order 9981 (1948) had declared the United States military as integrated!

After the war in Korea ended, Maj. Cunningham returned to the United States to learn to fly helicopters and was transferred to places such as Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, Wurzburg,

Germany and Ft. Riley, Kansas. Lastly, he was ordered to the Air National Guard in Northern Ohio, where he spent his final six years in the military.

As Air Advisor, Maj. Cunningham continued to fly fixed wing aircraft, helicopters, instructed and gave check rides to pilots in the Air National Guard. He retired from the Army Reserves in 1962. Unfortunately, Maj. Cunningham died in May of 1969, before Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. organization was established.

Note: All of the above information came from his military records and can be confirmed.

David O. Cunningham (Son)

