



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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ARTISHIA MAE CONAWAY STEPHENS



Enlisted Service No.: 32243241

There is an old adage about good things coming in small packages, which was particularly applicable to Artishia Mae Stephens (nee Conaway). Though short in stature at just five feet in height, she had an outsized personality that included a strict sense of discipline and exceptional work ethic. These traits and others contributed to her being a giant influence in the lives of family, friends, and fellow Air Force members, and especially co-workers and students at two leading educational institutions in her home state of Delaware.

Artishia was born on May 8, 1924, in Georgetown, the seat of Delaware's Sussex County and the southernmost of the state's other geographically-defined areas. Her education at local schools ended when she was ready to attend high school, so she enrolled in Howard High School in the city of Wilmington. It was the only high school for African American students in the state and was over 85 miles from her home, but this fact did not deter her from continuing her education.

After graduating in 1940, Artishia completed a two-year secretarial course at Berean Business College in Philadelphia, PA. Starting in January 1943, she applied her new skills as a Stenographer for the Philadelphia Afro-American newspaper. She directed the work of several typists in the paper's editorial section, and also prepared monthly reports, supply requisition sheets, maintained time records, and took dictation.

World War II was over in Europe but hostilities showed no signs of ceasing in the war with Japan when Artishia felt the call to serve her country. Upon her enlistment in June 1945, her educational background and work experience made her a perfect candidate to attend the Army Clerk School at Fort Des Moines, IA. Completing the 9-week course, she was initially assigned to the 318th Army Air Force (AAF) Base Unit at Tuskegee AAF, AL, which was still conducting Flight Training of African American Pilots for a still-segregated Army Air Force. She then transferred to Lockbourne Army Air Base near Columbus, OH, when Tuskegee AAF closed in late 1946. Lockbourne was the home of the newly established 332nd Fighter Wing (FW), itself the reincarnation (after a brief inactivation) of the all-black 332nd Fighter Group, which had distinguished itself in Combat in Italy during World War II. The command structure of the unit included many Combat Veterans from the 332nd, led by COL. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who had also been the 332nd's wartime leader as well.

At Lockbourne, Artishia's outstanding abilities and dedication to her job helped her to quickly advance in rank and responsibilities. She eventually became Special Orders Clerk in the Personnel Section of the 332nd FW Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron at what was now Lockbourne Air Force Base after the Air Force became a separate service in 1947. As a Staff Sergeant supervising four clerks in this section, she was also responsible for accurate recording and timely distribution of voice and written orders by Col. Davis to the troops within his command as well as correspondence to external Air Force personnel and entities at all levels. In recognition of her exemplary performance in this role, she was awarded the Army Commendation Ribbon that COL. Davis personally pinned on her.



While still serving in the Air Force at Lockbourne, Artishia married and took the last name Stephens. When SSgt Stephens became pregnant, Air Force regulations of the day forced her to leave the service which put an end to her budding military career.

Returning to Delaware, Ms. Stephens found employment at a new High School for African American students in Georgetown. William C. Jason Comprehensive High School was established in 1950 to provide Secondary School education for African American students within the county. Once again, Ms. Stephens put her skills to use, this time as a Certified Senior Secretary at the school. In this key position, she interacted with faculty and students in many areas to ensure efficient operations on campus. She was highly respected for her diligence in carrying out her duties as well as her stern but fair approach on all matters; and thus made a lasting impression as a positive role model within the local community.

In the late 1960s, desegregation of Delaware's schools provided an opportunity for Ms. Stephens to continue her work in supporting education. William C. Jason High School was absorbed into what soon became the first campus of Delaware Technical & Community College, now the Owens Campus, as a Bookkeeper. She continued in this role until retiring after 39 years of service in the state's education system.

Ms. Artishia Mae Conaway Stephens joined the "Lonely Eagles Chapter" on June 26, 2011, at 87 years of age. One of her many survivors was daughter Marcealeate S. Ruffin, with whom she was pregnant, and thus forced to leave the Air Force. Marcealeate is a former Sussex County, DE, Magistrate and a long-standing John H. Porter-First State Chapter Member, Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., Dover, DE. Through research resulting from Ms. Ruffin's inquiry into her mother's military service, Ms. Stephens was confirmed as a DOTA in 2018. Later that year, Ms. Ruffin, her sister Stephanie A. Stevens, and grandson Robert L. Ruffin Jr. were presented a replica Congressional Gold Medal honoring their Mother's service as a Tuskegee Airmen by The Honorable Representative Lisa Blunt Rochester (D, DE).

Source: Biography content provided by the John H. Porter 1st State Chapter, Delaware.

