

BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN INC. PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 830060
TUSKEGEE, AL 36083

EARL M. MIDDLETON 1919 - 2007



Earl Matthew Middleton was born in Orangeburg, South Carolina, on February 18, 1919. The Middleton name is associated with the United States' founding and early leadership in South Carolina, and it traces back to the Middleton Plantation in Charleston, South Carolina. Earl's grandfather, Abram Middleton, was once a slave on that plantation and spent the first half of his life as a slave and the latter half as a free man. During Reconstruction, Abram Middleton was a delegate to the 1868 South Carolina Constitution Convention.

Earl's parents made it clear that as a Middleton, they were important people with a history and were as good as anyone. At the same time, his parents made it known that the Middleton children were not above others whose circumstances differed. In 1937, he enrolled at Claflin College; present-day Claflin University. During his senior year, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, he decided to volunteer for the Air Corps instead of waiting for the Army to draft him. He heard that a Soldier made 21 dollars a month while a Pilot made 275 dollars per month.

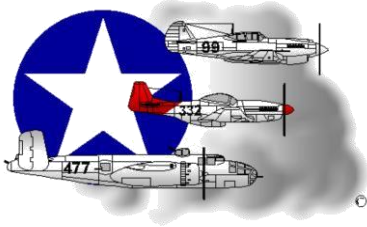
His first flight exam consisted of three questions: Who is Marion Anderson? (a renowned African American opera singer) who is Joe Louis? (a famous African American boxer) and Who is George Washington Carver? (a prominent African American scientist). He gave the correct inquiries, and his interviewers told him "That he would be hearing from them." In a few weeks, Cadet Middleton received orders to report to Tuskegee Army Airfield. Along with those orders was a first-class ticket from Orangeburg, South Carolina, to Chee Chaw, Alabama.

Upon reaching the station, Cadet Middleton presented his ticket to the railway official. After examining the ticket, the official replied, "You cannot board this train." At this moment, Cadet Middleton realized that his skin color was a problem. In the 1940s, the Jim Crow Laws in South Carolina prohibited blacks from using public transportation. Despite this setback, Middleton's determination remained unshaken.

After the refusal, Cadet Middleton returned to classes at Claflin, and a week later, he received a call from the War Department. After explaining the situation to the official, the official replied, "The War Department would straighten it out." When the train arrived, there was an empty first-class coach just for Cadet Middleton. He rode to Atlanta alone.

When Cadet Middleton arrived at Tuskegee, the Army assigned him to Class 42 I. The first training of class 1942 received the letter "C" for March, the graduation month; therefore, the "I" meant that graduation was September 1942. Between fifteen and twenty black men were in Class 42 I, eager to become Army Aviators. The first five weeks of flight training consisted of learning military habits and hazing by the upper-level students.

After those trying times, in Class 42, he started training on the Stearman PT-17. His first instructor was Sherman Rose. Rose graduated in the very first class of students from Tuskegee. After completing the course from Private Pilot to Instructor, he remained a Tuskegee Flight Instructor. Although the Primary Flight Instructors were African American, White Army officers gave proficiency tests or check rides. When it was time for a check ride, the



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Cadet's name would appear on the board in front of the orderly room. The Cadet reported to his Instructor Pilot at the flight line and gave him a salute. Often, the instructor did not return the greeting. Not saluting was their way of expressing their disapproval of Blacks training to become Pilots.

One day, while in uniform, Cadet Middleton went downtown to an African American photography shop to take a picture. That photo would become very important to Cadet Middleton in the decades to come. One day, Cadet Middleton's name appeared on the no-notice proficiency ride board, where Cadets' names were listed for surprise proficiency tests. After the check ride, Middleton's Instructor Pilot told him he had washed out of the training program, and the Army would reassign him. His washout shocked his Flight Instructor and Chief Anderson, Director of Pilot Training. They declared that Middleton's performance was up to standards. For Cadet Middleton, being eliminated was the biggest disappointment of his young life. Years later, Middleton stated, "Knowing who I am" helped me to get through it.

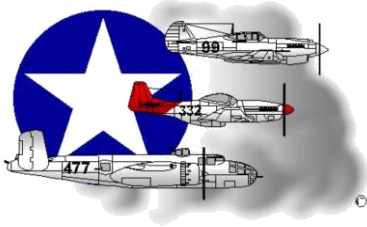
Later, Middleton learned from one of the Civilian Instructors that, in many cases, some of the natural Pilots were unjustly washed out from the program. Army Air Force Officers randomly picked the cadets to wash out because of the quota system without consulting the Instructors. The quota system, which authorized only 45 Black Pilots per year, was a clear injustice. The White Officers who did the picking were not working with the Cadets; therefore, they could not judge their ability. This discriminatory practice was a bitter reality for Cadet Middleton.

While on a bus ride to town, SSGT Middleton received another lesson in the ways of Jim Crow. When the Soldiers went into town, the laws required them to ride on the back of the bus. The Soldiers got on the front of the bus, put their dimes in the coin box, and had to get off the bus and get on the back of the bus. Often, the White driver would pull off and leave the Soldiers stranded downtown. Leaving the Soldiers was especially effective near the 11 p.m. curfew. If the soldiers were late returning, their White leaders disciplined them. Once, while downtown, he witnessed a White man kill a Black Soldier.

In April 1945, SSGT Middleton transferred to the 129th Port Battalion assigned to Fort Eustis, Newport News, Virginia. From Newport News, the 129th went to Seattle, Washington, their port of embarkation to the Pacific Theater. Onboard the troop carrier, SSGT Middleton strayed away from his Methodist roots and started gambling as boredom set in. The Soldiers gambled in the restrooms and any place wide enough to put down a blanket. There was no racial segregation on the troop carrier, which led to integrated crap games. This camaraderie among the Soldiers fostered a sense of unity and solidarity, transcending racial barriers.

SSGT Middleton was on the "Shima" when the Atomic Bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forcing Japan's surrender. On January 20, 1946, he returned to California and mustered out of the Army eight days later at Camp Gordon, Georgia. Upon reviewing his discharge papers, Mr. Middleton noticed the Army excluded his time served at Tuskegee from his records. He brought the mistake to those in charge, but they refused to include his training to become a Pilot in his official files. Research at the National Archives revealed the Army excluded his name from the class of 42 I, but Mr. Middleton still had the photo. Today, his Army Separation Qualification Records state he had "A.A.F" Basic Training at Tuskegee.

After Earl Middleton returned home, a close friend—a white Army Captain from Boston—tried to persuade him to move up North. Earl and his new wife seriously considered relocating because there were more opportunities for



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Black Professionals in the North than in the South; in addition to the more tolerant racial attitudes in the Northeast and the West after the post-war years of 1949. Those areas offered more opportunities due to the greater population density. The Middleton's saw the positives in staying close to their roots in a small town.

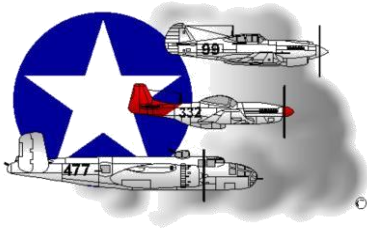
Several years after returning home, Mr. Middleton approached the local Veterans of Foreign Wars (V.F.W.) about joining the organization. Despite the White members being aware of the contribution African American soldiers made during the war, South Carolina was not ready for integration. Earl saw this as an opportunity to honor his classmates, friends, and neighbors who lost their lives during the war. Earl, along with other Black Veterans, organized V.F.W. Post 8166, dedicated to Broadus James Jamerson Jr., who died in December 1943 when a Japanese torpedo struck the troop carrier he was on. The African American veterans of Orangeburg organized Post 8166 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars on December 11, 1952, and the V.F.W. continued to serve the veterans of U.S. conflicts.

Earl Middleton started a Barbershop Catering to the local African American men around Orangeburg to earn a living. His celebrity status and notoriety grew after he passed the examination to become a Property Broker and Insurance Agent. He initially focused on selling insurance because everyone needed it. Earl had to give up the Barbershop when the Insurance Agency became too big. In 1964, he purchased the building at 211 Amelia St. in Orangeburg, across the street from the Barbershop. During the 1990s, the address changed to 1211 Amelia Street. Earl purchased the building with part of the 17,000 dollars he won, shooting craps on the troop carrier.

His experience at Tuskegee convinced him of community service's importance and the need for an organization to help boys learn to become disciplined in a positive atmosphere away from home. He established a Boy Scout Troop that the Trinity United Methodist Church sponsored. Also, he was a member of the South Carolina Council of Human Relations. The Council was a group of people throughout South Carolina striving to work across racial lines. In 1960, he joined a group of Black Community Activists to establish the Statewide Homes Foundation. This group was a nonprofit organization whose purpose was to find other Blacks who wanted to be homeowners and could make it happen.

In 1956, he was a delegate to the Republican National Convention. Many people have forgotten that former slaves who could vote after the Civil War did so as Republicans. The process changed with the election of John Kennedy in 1960. For the Convention, there were two delegations from South Carolina. One was racially mixed, while the other was all White. The R.N.C. seated the all-white delegation. When the racially mixed group members returned home, Middleton stayed on as an assistant doorkeeper and witnessed Dwight Eisenhower's nomination to his second term as President of the United States of America.

In 1968, Earl Middleton served on the South Carolina Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. The committee aimed to gather information on the racial tensions in Orangeburg. At that time, college students were angry because they were not allowed entrance into the white-owned Allstar Bowling Lanes. Governor Robert E. McNair called out the National Guard and the Highway Patrol to enforce the order. Earl Middleton and his wife were on the campus of South Carolina State College that night when the National Guard and the Highway Patrol killed three students. This incident became known as the Orangeburg Massacre.



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In 1972, the Middleton Agency partnered with the Bagnal Builders to market the Northwood Estates in Orangeburg. Historically, the neighborhoods in Orangeburg demonstrated a racial divide in the city. African Americans lived in their communities, and Whites lived in their communities. Northwood Estates brought together the races. The Bagnal Builders had a well-developed project in a racially neutral area. As a result of the partnership, local minority ownership grew, and today, the Northwoods Estates is one of the upper-middle-class neighborhoods in Orangeburg, South Carolina.

In 1974, Orangeburg House District 95 elected Earl Middleton to the South Carolina Legislature as its Representative. During his first term, he was a founding member of the South Carolina Legislative Black Caucus, which aimed to ensure that Black Citizens had a voice in the legislature. Middleton served with Ernest Finney Jr., who became the South Carolina Supreme Court's first black Chief Justice. Representative Middleton served nine years in the South Carolina House of Representatives.

In 1985, the Middleton Real Estate Agency became the first Black-Owned Real Estate Company affiliated with Coldwell Banker. Founded in 1906 in San Francisco, Coldwell Banker is now headquartered in New Jersey; it has 3000 offices in 49 countries and territories. The Wall Street Journal featured the Middleton Agency in its April 29, 1992, issue. In 1996, Charles H.P. Duell asked Earl Middleton to join the Middleton Foundation. Duell was a descendant of the owners of the Middleton Plantation. The foundation's purpose was to manage the museum and gardens of the 100-acre estate. The Middleton Place principles are to preserve the historical property and interpret the lives of those who lived and worked there, whether positive or negative, African America or White.

Bellsouth, now AT&T, featured Earl Middleton on its South Carolina African American Calendar for April 1996. In February 2004, the community came together at Claflin University to dedicate the Earl Middleton Highway and celebrate his eighty-fifth birthday. In July 2007, President George W. Bush presented him with the replica Congressional Gold Medal at Charleston Air Force Base. Middleton was not present when the other Tuskegee Airmen received their replica Congressional Gold Medals in March of that year.

On November 20, 2007, Earl Matthew Middleton joined the Lonely Eagles Chapter at 88 years, nine months, and two days. He was predeceased by his parents, wife, brothers, Samuel T. and James W. Middleton, and sisters, Helen Middleton Haigler and Dorothy Louise Middleton. He is survived by a brother Phillip G. Middleton of Atlanta; three children, Anita Middleton (Alphonso) Pearson of Raleigh, NC, Kenneth E. (Cynthia) Middleton, and Karen Middleton (Kenny) Griffin of Nashville, Tennessee.

In 2008, the University of South Carolina Press published his memoir, Knowing Who I Am: A Black Entrepreneur's Struggle and Success in the American South, authored by Earl Middleton and Joy W. Barnes.

