



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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CLAY DAN ALBRIGHT, JR.



Enlisted Service No.: Not Applicable
Commissioned Officer Service No.: O-401551

The ground-breaking research of Major Theopolis “Ted” W. Johnson, USAF (Retired, Deceased) identified thousands of individuals who were involved in the “Tuskegee Experience”. Johnson’s work was based upon the accepted criteria that anyone who served at Tuskegee Army Air Field or in any of the programs stemming from the Tuskegee Experience between the years 1941 and 1949 is considered to be a Documented Original Tuskegee Airman (DOTA). The numbers of DOTA includes military and civilian men and women, but it may be surprising to some that Caucasians were also involved in the Tuskegee Experience and therefore are also DOTA. One of the earliest members of this group is Clay D. Albright, Jr., whose contributions as a flight instructor at Tuskegee Army Air Field (AAF) have been gratefully acknowledged by pilots who trained there.

Although Albright was born in New Mexico on December 30, 1917, his family moved to Oklahoma at some point and settled in the town of El Reno. After secondary school he enrolled at Oklahoma State University. Here he balanced academic studies and athletics, achieving notable success in the latter as a member of the wrestling team. Team honors included winning the 13th NCAA Wrestling Tournament in 1940, while in the same year Clay achieved an individual award as the tournament’s second-place finisher in the 165-lb. weight class. At the season’s end he was a second-team All-American wrestler, also in the 165-lb. class.

After college Albright completed Air Corps pilot training. In January 1942 he was a 1st Lt. and was assigned to Tuskegee AAF, AL as an advanced flight instructor. He appears to have worked with the first class of African Americans who completed training as U.S. military pilots in Class 42-C-SE on March 7, 1942. This illustrious group included then-Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who later stated in a letter to Albright that reads: “You helped us all in a time when it wasn’t a popular thing to do to help black folks. ... You taught me more about flying fighters than I learned in the rest of my whole career.” Albright also made a very positive impression on Aviation Cadet Charles W. Dryden, who graduated in the second training class (42-D-SE) at Tuskegee AAF. His total class of three cadets received individual instruction from the advanced flight instructors at the base, with Dryden drawing now-Captain Albright as his instructor. In this last phase of their training, the group was penalized with KP duty after an accidental violation of military discipline in which they met with an enlisted gunnery expert in their barracks prior to undergoing gunnery training. According to Dryden in his autobiography *A-Train: Memoirs Of A Tuskegee Airmen* (University of Alabama Press, 1997, pages 56-59), Albright was particularly vocal in his support of Dryden and his fellow cadets in cheering them on as they worked through their punishment. Dryden states that this support from Albright and the other advanced flight instructors greatly contributed to the group surviving their ordeal and eventually becoming Air Corps pilots.



By mid-1943, rumors of the formation of an all-black medium bombardment group were rampant at Tuskegee, where pilot training for the new unit was expected to occur. In September the first twin-engine training aircraft, designated AT-10, were delivered to Tuskegee AAF. Shortly thereafter a twin-engine training school was established at Tuskegee with Capt. Albright as commander. More AT-10s were delivered and instructors arrived along with students who would comprise Class 43-K-TE. This class completed training on December 3, 1944, and was the first of twenty classes that graduated pilots destined for the 477th Bombardment Group (Medium). Capt. Albright remained with the school until July 1945 when he transferred to the Pacific Theater and flew a number of missions against Japanese forces with the 475th Fighter Group.

In the immediate postwar years Albright held the rank of Major and was recognized as a “hot stick” which was Air Force slang for an excellent pilot. He was assigned as a squadron commander in the 4th Fighter Group, one of the first of the Army Air Force’s jet-equipped units. This assignment led to his participation in the newly restarted National Air Races in August 1947 and its famous Bendix Trophy Race. Prior to World War II, the National Air Races were as popular as any professional sporting event in the present day. A new event in 1947 for what was originally a race of propeller-driven aircraft was a separate competition for jets that involved making the fastest flight from Van Nuys, CA to Cleveland, OH. Flying a Lockheed P-80A, Maj. Albright averaged nearly 500mph over the flight’s 2,000 miles and held the lead for most of the race. Despite this incredible performance for that period of aviation, he finished second by a slim margin when the winner allegedly did not receive a radio message to temporarily land in Dayton, OH to avoid bad weather over the finish line at Cleveland.



Albright went on to fly combat tours in Korea and Vietnam in which he earned decorations that included three Bronze Stars for valor along with the Air Force Commendation Medal. He also commanded various flying units and Air Force bases until his retirement as a Colonel in 1970.

Albright returned to his agricultural roots after his 30 years of military service wherein he enjoyed farming and raising cattle and hogs in Crescent City, CA, and later near Richmond, VA. According to family members, his association with the Tuskegee program remained one of the most memorable times in his career.

Clay D. Albright, Jr. joined the “Lonely Eagles Chapter” on November 30, 2008, just one month before his 91st birthday.

