



# BIOGRAPHY

**A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN**

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## FRED TODD JOHNSON



Enlisted Service No.: 32958328  
Commissioned Officer Service No.: O-2089042

Fred T. Johnson ranks high within the numbers of Tuskegee Airmen who distinguished themselves in scholastic subjects, in military aviation, and as educators in their postwar careers. Mr. Johnson has the additional distinction of being revered for his positive influence in the lives of his former pupils, a fact that is still commemorated long after his passing.

He was born in Bloomington, IN on June 7, 1924 to Delaware residents George A. and Edith P. Johnson. At the time his father, the son of a former slave, served as principal of the city of Wilmington's Howard High School from 1924 to 1959. Due to segregation in the state and particularly in the city of Wilmington in the 1920s, non-whites were not admitted into the city's hospitals. As a result, Fred's parents decided to have his mother return to her home state of Indiana for admission into a hospital where he and a younger sister were born. His family lived in the rural town of Stanton, DE, but because there were few educational opportunities for black students in the area he attended public schools in Wilmington. He subsequently graduated with honors from the city's Howard High School in 1941 and enrolled in pre-med studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN, the city of his birth.

In the midst of his studies in 1943. Fred was notified by his draft board in Delaware that the pool of registrants from which they were drawing to meet their quota of African American draftees for the war effort was running low. To meet their numbers, men with student deferments like himself were going to lose their exempt status and be inducted into military service. Fred then elected to leave college and volunteer for the Army Air Force in September 1943 rather than to leave his fate in the hands of someone else. During his induction in Camden, NJ, he narrowly escaped assignment to the Navy's submarine force as a part of the service's first effort to assign African Americans to their undersea fleet. This fortuitous event occurred when the recruiter re-reviewed Fred's paperwork and noted that he was a "volunteer" and thus eligible to choose his branch of service.

Fred completed processing at Basic Training Center #10 in Greensboro, NC, where he also signed up for aviation training at Tuskegee AAF, AL. He finished a two-month stint of basic cadet training at Keesler Field, MS, that was followed by his assignment to pilot training class 45-C-SE at Tuskegee. However, the all-black 477th Bomb Group (Medium) was being formed at the time and there was an urgent need for aircrew, particularly navigators, to fill its ranks. Fred was reassigned to the unit and sent to



Hondo AAF, TX to begin three months of navigator training in class 45-12NA. Upon graduation in April 1945, he was awarded his navigator wings and a commission as a second lieutenant in the Army Air Force. 2nd Lt. Johnson's next assignments were to bombardier school at San Angelo, TX, and subsequently to the B-25-equipped 617th Bomb Squadron (Medium) stationed at Godman AAF on Ft. Knox, KY. Yet another change in the military's needs resulted in 2nd Lt. Johnson being re-selected to train as a pilot and his reassignment back to Tuskegee for training. The war ended while 2nd Lt. Johnson was undergoing primary training in the PT-17 as a member of class 46-B-SE. The cessation of hostilities and accompanying reductions in the military led to him being demobilized in November 1945 before he completed pilot training. However, this occurrence was not the end of his military service, for he served an additional 12 years in the Air Force Reserves.

After the war, Fred returned to Indiana University to complete his studies. He was also a member of the Shuttle Hurdle Championship of America Team at the 1947 Penn Relays Track & Field Meet in Philadelphia, PA.

His first teaching job after graduate school was at Prairie View A. & M. College in Texas where he taught Physical Education and Kinesiology. He came back to Delaware in 1950 to join the faculty of the first high school for black students in Sussex County, William C. Jason High School in Georgetown, where he taught Physical Education, Chemistry, and Health Education.

In 1959, Fred became the first African American to teach at Wilmington's Warner Junior High School. He taught Physical Science as well as Earth Science and became widely known for his outstanding teaching abilities. He also coached track at Warner from 1960-1969 where his teams won several city and county championships plus one state championship. In 1968, he represented Delaware public school teachers at the Bell Labs Teacher-Student conference held at the telecom giant's noted Murray Hill research facility in New Jersey. As further evidence of his recognized skills in teaching science he was given charge of the planetarium at Warner and was also chairman of the school's Science Department until his retirement in 1981. He was then honored with a collection of artifacts and mementos of his educational achievements placed in a prominent place near the school's entrance that remains on display into the present day.



Some of Fred's other interests included memberships in Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity and the Indiana University Alumni Association. Two other "memberships" were directly associated with his military service during World War II. The first came about from a belated documentation search from which he was finally recognized in March of 2013 as a Documented Original Tuskegee Airman and was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal. The ceremony was particularly special in that it was held at his old high school, the same one in which his father was principal for 35 years, with Delaware's governor Thomas Carper presenting the medal. Another well-deserved tribute occurred in 2016 when he was inducted as a member of the Delaware Aviation Hall of Fame in recognition of his status as a state resident who demonstrated exceptional skills in the field of flight during his military service.

As a final tribute, Fred joined the "Lonely Eagles Chapter" on January 17, 2017 at 92 years of age.

