



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

Tuskegee Airmen Inc. Public Relations, P.O. Box 830060
Tuskegee, AL 36083

JAMES OTIS HANDY, JR.



Enlisted Service No.: 32243241

The African Americans recognized as Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen (DOTA) were all pioneers, but a relative handful of individuals like James Handy were the very first of the thousands who would follow them into serving their country. Mr. Handy and his fellow airmen established a baseline of excellence that is a common quality within many DOTA's lives in both war and peace.

Born in Salisbury, MD on January 20, 1920, James eventually went to Tuskegee Institute in 1938 to study agriculture and become a farm demonstration agent per his father's urging. In addition to his studies, he became a member of ROTC and thus came to know fellow student Daniel "Chappy" James as well as the head of the ROTC department, Captain Benjamin Davis, Jr. Both of these men went on to become noted DOTA and postwar Air Force generals.

In 1941, a call went out amongst the student population for volunteers to enlist in a newly forming Air Corps unit that was to be composed of African American airmen. They were to be the initial cadre of personnel that would constitute the 99th Pursuit (later Fighter) Squadron, consisting of specialists in many fields that needed to be in place to support flight operations prior to pilot training and assignment of aircraft. Mr. Handy was persuaded to sign up by Dr. Frederick Patterson, President of Tuskegee Institute, who encouraged him by stating that the training would be difficult and that only the best should apply. He volunteered with the intention of becoming what he later humorously referred to as an "aeronautical technical engineer", which meant that he wanted to be a mechanic.

In an interview many years after his military service, Mr. Handy vividly recalled his experiences during initial training at Chanute Field, IL. Chief among the conditions that he and his fellow airmen endured was that the unit was segregated in run-down barracks. Basic needs such as going to the washroom required that they went in

groups of three to prevent being assaulted by fellow students of a different race. After completion of their training, he recalled that his group was sent to Maxwell Field near Montgomery, AL while awaiting the completion of the airfield at Tuskegee. They were fresh from training to Air Corps standards as qualified mechanics, but were instead assigned to KP and yard duty in lieu of performing needed maintenance on the planes flown by the white pilots at the base. He also recalled seeing the humiliation of black air cadets who washed out of pilot training at Tuskegee, many of whom were college graduates, being subsequently assigned to wait on the tables of white student pilots at Maxwell.

In April 1943, Mr. Handy shipped out with the 99th Fighter Squadron to North Africa, where the unit first entered into combat. He stayed with the 99th as it engaged in further combat operations as it moved to Sicily and eventually to Italy. Throughout this period, he performed maintenance as a crew chief on P-39's, P-40's, P-47's, and P-51's while the unit progressed through these models as its mission aircraft. A customary practice of the time was that the crew chief of a particular aircraft would have his name and identification painted on the frame of the aircraft's canopy. Mr. Handy had his name painted along the cockpit frames of the aircraft of two fighter pilots who later lost their lives, one in air combat and another in a landing accident. However, neither was flying aircraft that he crewed on the day of their separate losses.



Returning home after war as a SSgt, Mr. Handy used the G.I. Bill to complete his studies in education at Alabama State College. While matriculating there he also pitched on the baseball team and played basketball. He later moved to Uria, AL, where he became vice principal, track coach, and basketball coach at the local high school.



In 1962, Mr. Handy moved to Georgetown, DE, where he taught social studies at William C. Jason Comprehensive High School. In that same year his wife Mabel, whom he had married while at Tuskegee Institute, passed away and he subsequently married Ms. Delores Norwood. Their union would last forty-nine years. He moved on to continue teaching social studies at Georgetown High School in the late 1960s and remained there until retiring in 1992.

In addition to being active in the community with the NAACP and his fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, he was involved for many years with the John H. Porter-First State Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. in Dover, DE.

James Otis Handy, Jr. joined the "Lonely Eagles Chapter" on April 13, 2013, at 93 years of age.

