



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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LOUIS RAYFIELD PURNELL, SR.



Enlisted Service No.: 12012820
Commissioned Officer Service No.: O-790463

The facts of many original Tuskegee Airmen's extraordinary achievements in military service and their postwar accomplishments in fields such as education, government service, law, and medicine, despite obstacles resulting from segregation laws and cultural norms, are truly inspirational. A word that is often used to describe their careers is pioneer or some variation as they worked in areas in which few if any African Americans had been involved. The life of Louis Rayfield Purnell, Sr. epitomizes this last aspect through his various roles involving undersea and aerospace subjects.

Purnell was born on April 5, 1920 in the Eastern Shore of Maryland small town of Snow Hill. In 1922, his schoolteacher parents moved the family to the city of Wilmington, DE, in search of better job opportunities. Unable to secure a teaching position, Purnell's father started working for the Pullman Company as a craftsman finishing interiors of new Pullman rail cars while his mother worked as a substitute teacher in the Wilmington public schools. When the Great Depression came in 1929 Purnell's father was fortunate to keep his job, although at reduced wages. The resulting hardship lessened in 1933 when the family inherited a farm near Cape May, NJ. Purnell's mother moved the children there to take advantage of the self-sufficiency offered by the farm while the elder Purnell stayed at Pullman in Wilmington and came home on alternate weekends.

The education available to Purnell in Cape May was far better than what was available in the segregated schools he previously attended in Delaware. Not only was Cape May High School superior, it was also integrated, although the number of black students was extremely small. Purnell graduated with honors in 1937 and left to attend Lincoln University in Oxford, PA as a Psychology major.

While at Lincoln in 1939, his childhood dream of becoming a pilot, first stirred by observing aircraft operating at the Coast Guard air station in Cape May, came to fruition. The Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) had opened to HBCU students, stimulating Purnell to immediately sign up for the program. He finished his primary flight training while still at Lincoln, then he applied for a slot in the newly opened military pilot training program for African Americans at Tuskegee Army Air Field (AAF).

In February 1942 Purnell left Lincoln University and reported to Tuskegee AAF as an aviation cadet in Class 42-F-SE. He completed flight training on July 2, 1942, was awarded a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant, and remained at Tuskegee as a member of the 99th Fighter Squadron. He was one of the original 99th pilots who were sent to North Africa in April 1943. His 50-mission tour requirement was cut short at 40 when he was injured in his tent by an out-of-control jeep driven by a cook teaching himself to drive. He was sent home to be treated and recover from his injuries. Once healed, he was assigned to Selfridge Field, MI, where he served as an instructor and initial

commander of the 553rd Replacement Training Unit. The unit's personnel were 99th Fighter Squadron veterans tasked with teaching combat tactics to newly graduated pilots from Tuskegee AAF. He quickly grew disenchanted with instructing and asked to join the 332nd Fighter Group, which had been formed with three new squadrons and would later absorb the 99th as well. He was accepted and the unit was sent to Italy in early 1944. By the fall of that year, he and the other pilots of the 332nd were flying P-51 Mustangs as escorts of B-17 and B-24 bombers hitting targets in Germany and southern Europe. Purnell eventually flew 88 missions in his two tours and achieved the rank of Captain. In recognition of his skills, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with six oak leaf clusters.



At the end of war, Purnell returned to his studies at Lincoln University and graduated in 1947. He halted a pursuit of graduate work in speech therapy at Howard University in order to earn income to support his growing family. This need led to his pursuit of steady employment with the government. He started out at the post office but found the work unchallenging. His search for more fulfilling responsibilities over the next decade included teaching at a school for learning disabled students, working as a supervisor at the Library of Congress Book Exchange, and identifying the remains of unknown GIs who died in World War II for the Office of the Quartermaster General.

Finally, in 1961, Purnell landed a temporary six-month job working as a museum specialist in the Division of Invertebrate Paleontology and Paleobotany in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. He made the most of this opportunity and at the end of the six-month period he was offered a permanent position. For the next several years, he identified, cataloged, and tagged specimens, traveling the world on several oceanographic expeditions aboard the Oceanographic Research Ship USNS *Chain*. In between these trips, he noted that several nautiloids were listed as missing in the museum's inventory. He subsequently conducted a diligent search through the museum's attic and located the missing specimens. He followed this work with writing a new catalog that included the formerly lost examples. That reference was published in 1968 and is still in use today.



However, the pull of aviation was strong, and later in 1968 he joined the Astronautics Department of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. Despite opposition, he rose to the position of Curator in 1980 and became the first African American to hold that title at the Smithsonian. His duties involved the acquisition and care of spacecraft. "We had spacecraft from every mission...I became a specialist in spacesuits, too, and food—all the things that went on a mission."

Purnell married Mildred Reagan Purnell in 1947 and together they raised their children, Louis R. Purnell, Jr. and Yvonne Purnell Brown. He later (1970) married JoAnn Purnell. He retired in 1990, and afterwards he continued to fly and to give speeches about his experiences as a Tuskegee Airman, hoping to encourage young African Americans to pursue careers in aviation and space flight. He was also a proud member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.

Louis Rayfield Purnell, Sr. joined the "Lonely Eagles Chapter" on August 10, 2001, at 81 years of age.

