



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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NATHAN OTHA THOMAS



Enlisted Service No.: 32243241

The last living Delaware native to serve as a Tuskegee Airman was an eloquent and inspirational speaker who never hesitated to reveal the “secret” of the Tuskegee Airmen’s success: They believed in themselves and their country. They never gave up and achieved their goals, despite difficult circumstances.

On October 2, 1926, Nathan Otha Thomas (Nate) started his journey and legacy on this earth. He was the youngest of eleven children in the family of Robert Wesley Thomas, a Methodist minister, and Minnie Belle Pinkett Thomas. His father’s calling required the family to relocate several times within Delaware, Maryland, and New Jersey. For this reason, Nate’s primary education was at several locations prior to his secondary education being split between Salem High School in New Jersey and Robert Russo Moton High School in Easton, MD, from which he graduated in 1944.

Nate began working toward a college degree in September 1944 after previously being accepted to attend Delaware State College in Dover, DE. Initially, he majored in Industrial Arts but after a time changed his major to sociology with a minor in history. As an athlete, he was a member of the track team and ran in the University of Pennsylvania Carnival Relays, the oldest track and field competition in the country that is now known as the Penn Relays.

In July of 1945, Nate’s education was interrupted when he was drafted into the Army Air Force. He first served at Aberdeen, MD, then was sent to Sheppard Field, TX, where he score high on an examination to determine his military career field. As a result, he was trained as an Information and Education Specialist and transferred to Tuskegee AAF, AL, where flight training of pilots for the Army Air Force’s separate African American units was still in operation. He performed administrative duties and provided vital flight information to the flight personnel at the base until his honorable discharge in January 1947.

Fresh from completing his military obligation, Nate quickly returned to Delaware State College in January 1947 and resumed his studies. One impactful adjunct to his college work was an invitation by Bishop Edgar A. Love, one of the founders of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. to become a member of the fraternity. After accepting the invitation, Nate was initiated into the Psi Epsilon Chapter on May 17, 1947. He remained active for over 75 years in supporting the fraternity’s goals and programs, including working in local chapters and attending annual conventions.

After graduation from Delaware State in 1950, Nate went to work for the Department of Commerce in Washington, DC. In March 1951 he married Lolia Tilghman, who he met at Delaware State College, and started a family. Later, he was employed by the United States Postal Service (USPS) in Philadelphia, PA. He retired from the USPS in 1981, but then accepted a position with the Philadelphia School District from which he finally retired in 1987.

Because community service was important to Nate, he became a Democratic Executive Committee person for the 17th Ward, 10th Division in his adopted hometown of Philadelphia. While working with State Representative Stephen Kinsey, his revelation of being an original Tuskegee Airman was the springboard of their partnering efforts that eventually resulted in the state officially declaring March 29th as a day of recognition of the Tuskegee Airmen. The subsequent publicity from state recognition contributed to the bestowal of more awards and accolades to Nate and The Greater Philadelphia Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen (TAI), along with opportunities to make several presentations and extensive interviews in tribute to their distinguished service. One award that he received that was particularly special was a Congressional Gold Medal commemorating his service as a Tuskegee Airman that was presented by Pennsylvania House of Representative Dwight Evans (D-PA, 3rd) in 2019.

In gratitude for the education that he received at Delaware State College, Nate was a dedicated supporter of the school's alumni group. He was an ever-present attendee at school events, including one year where he was the Grand Marshall in the Homecoming parade. For the Philadelphia Alumni Chapter, he coordinated bus trips for area high school students to attend High School Day programs at Delaware State, arranged for their attendance at sporting events, and assisted potential students in preparing enrollment and financial aid documents. As one of three DOTA from now-Delaware State University, he also coordinated trips for students to become aware of the school's Aviation Program that offers training in a number of aviation careers, both in the cockpit and ground-based occupations. In coordination with The Greater Philadelphia Chapter of TAI, an Administration and Operations scholarship was created in his honor that is awarded to Aviation students. In 2021, a monument commemorating Nate and the other two DOTA who are also Delaware State University alumni, former school president Dr. Luna I. Mishoe and graduate Maxwell Honemond ('47), was erected after development by the John H. Porter-First State Chapter of TAI in Dover, DE.



At an early age, Nate accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior under his father's ministry, eventually leading him into joining Janes Memorial United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, PA in 1953. From that date forward he was active with the United Methodist Men, served as immediate past chairman of the Higher Education and Campus Ministry Committee, and was a former Sunday School teacher. He also served as president and vice-president of the Oriole Historical Society, which is committed to the restoration of the first African-American Church in Oriole, MD.

After a life well-lived in service to family, friends, community, and to his country, Nathan Otha Thomas joined the "Lonely Eagles Chapter" on December 22, 2024, at 98 years of age.

