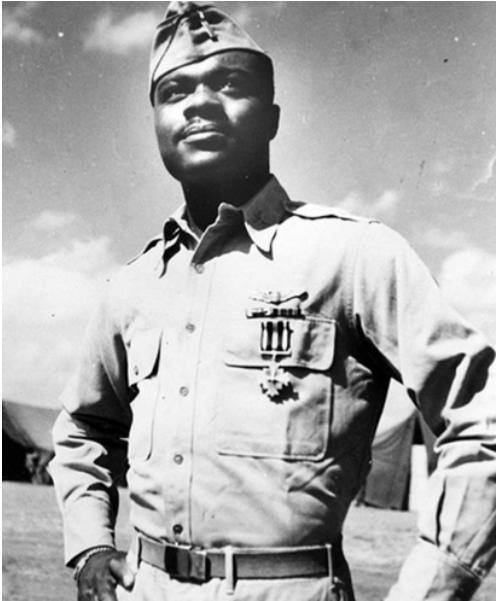


# BIOGRAPHY

**A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN**

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

## CLARENCE D. LESTER, JR.



Enlisted Service No.: 15172327

Commissioned Officer Service No.: O-817590 six HBCU's in the Civilian Pilot Training Program in the late 1930s.

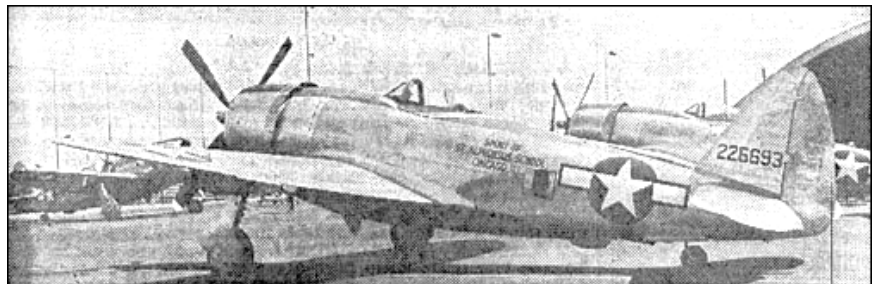
It may not be very well known that Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s was arguably the most prominent center of aviation for African Americans. It was here that the influential *Chicago Defender* newspaper published stories about legendary local black aviation pioneers like Bessie Coleman, Willa Brown, Cornelius Coffey, and John Robinson. Their achievements in aviation inspired others to seek opportunities to enjoy the freedom of traversing the air in a machine under their control.

Clarence D. Lester, Jr. was one of the Chicago residents who carried out his aspiration to fly. He was born in Richmond, VA on March 8, 1923 but grew up on Chicago's storied South Side. His father, Clarence D. Lester Sr., was a chef, and his mother Lillian was a nurse with the Chicago Board of Health. Clarence was exposed to aviation at a young age as one of his mother's close friends was Janet Harmon Waterford Bragg, also a nurse, and an early African American aviator. She was a founding member of the Challenger Air Pilots, a group who built the first black-owned airfield and who later lobbied the government to include

At five years old Lester had already evidenced a determination to become a pilot. His opportunity finally came when the U.S. entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Lester was a student at West Virginia State College at the time but in 1942 he applied and was accepted for aviation cadet training. He was sent to Tuskegee Army Air Field where he completed flight training in class 43-K-SE and received his wings on December 5, 1943.

After completing transition training in April 1944, Lester was sent to Italy where he joined the 100th Fighter Squadron in the 332nd Fighter Group. It wasn't long before he acquired the nickname "Lucky" due to his seemingly inexhaustible good fortune in playing poker.

When Lester joined the 332nd they were in the midst of a period in which the P-47 Thunderbolt was their mission aircraft. His famed luck was at play in that his assigned P-47D, serial number 42-26693 and named "Spirit of St. Alphonsus School", was bought by the 1200 white students of a Catholic school named St. Alphonsus in Chicago.



The students there were enormously active in supporting the war effort through paper drives, scrap metal drives, and war bond drives. When their latest efforts resulted in a contribution equal to the value of a fighter plane, they requested the honor of naming a plane which was granted. Newspapers reported the warm reception that Lester's mother received upon visiting the school at Lester's request to inform them that "their" airplane was being flown by a city resident who was also a Catholic. The fervor that the students displayed upon learning this

news transcended race relations of the day. Their support included distributing photographs of the plane and its pilot and even offering daily prayers for his safety and victorious return.

The 332nd soon traded their P-47s for P-51s which was better suited to carry out their newly assigned mission to escort long-range bombers to their targets and defend them against enemy fighter attacks. On July 18, 1944, Lester was flying P-51C serial number 52-103956 named "Miss-Pelt" on an escort mission to the Luftwaffe base at Memmingen in southern Germany. This is the mission in which he became an instant legend by shooting down three German ME-109s in only five to six minutes. For this heroism, Lester was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross. During his time with the 332nd, Lester completed more than 90 missions and destroyed additional aircraft on the ground.



When the war ended Lester elected to stay in the Air Force. He made the transition to jets and had the closest encounter with death or serious injury in his career while flying with the 525th Fighter-Bomber Squadron of the 86th Fighter-Bomber Group at Neubiberg Air Base, West Germany. On July 5, 1951, he was piloting F-84E serial number 49-2320 near the town of Ilesheim when the engine failed while flying at approximately 450 mph and an altitude of just 800 feet. Lacking time and height to attempt a restart he had to get out fast and thus ejected from the jet. Once again, luck was on his side, as he cleared the airplane and landed in a soft and newly plowed field without injury. Some sources claim he was only the sixth pilot to successfully use an ejection seat. Interestingly, the Air Force subsequently did tests that proved that higher speeds were safer for ejecting than the previous procedure of slowing down. Further, Lester became the first African American to qualify for membership in an exclusive aviator's club called "Fraternitas Exjectio", composed of pilots who survived ejection from a jet.

After a variety of assignments, including a stint as commander of the 5010th Air Base Group at Eielson AFB, Alaska, Lester's career culminated in a plum assignment in the Pentagon. Armed with a bachelor's degree from Stanford University, he worked with the famous "Whiz Kids" in Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's office.

In 1969, Lester retired as a full colonel and was appointed as associate director of social services for Montgomery County in Rockville, Maryland. He went on to partner with three friends from business school and the Pentagon to establish the Inner City Fund (ICF). Starting without any outside funding, the company sought to finance minority-owned businesses in Washington, DC. In 1972, ICF went into consulting and became a well-respected advisor to a number of U.S. federal agencies.

Lester's exemplary life of service and run of good luck ended when he joined the "Lonely Eagles Chapter" after succumbing to cancer at the age of just 63 on March 17, 1986. However, his memory lives on in his appearance in a number of photographs of the 332nd Fighter Group in the collection of the National Archives. In addition, his three-victory feat is memorialized in the artwork entitled "Two Down, One To Go" by William S. Phillips.

