



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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1ST LT. JAMES R. POLKINGHORNE, JR.



1st LT. James R. Polkinghorne, Jr., was born June 16, 1921, to respected business owners and community leaders, James R., Sr. and Maggie Polkinghorne in Pensacola, FL. He was the only son among six children. LT Polkinghorne was known as “Jitney” by his beloved family and close friends. As a young boy, he had a paper delivery route. He gladly delivered the paper on his bicycle accompanied by the family dog, Prince. Two of his close friends and neighbors were brothers, Hylton and Edwin Shirley. They were brothers of Don Shirley, the renowned American classical and jazz pianist and composer. The Oscar winning movie “The Green Book” is loosely based on Don Shirley's musical life and career.



LT Polkinghorne graduated from Booker T. Washington High School, known as Washington High School, in 1937. After his High School graduation, he enrolled and attended Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College, which is now Florida A and M University. LT Polkinghorne had an interest in studying law, after he earned his undergraduate degree. While a student in High School and during College, he worked at San Carlos Hotel in Pensacola as a Bellhop. Later he waited tables in the dining room to help finance his education. One bonus to this job was that he was able to bring home his youngest sister's favorite ice cream, which was always a special treat for her. He would wake her up and feed her vanilla ice cream. She was only a few years old and adored her one and only brother.

LT Polkinghorne was a third-year student in college when he registered for the draft on February 16, 1942, to serve his country during WWII. He enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces as a Private at U.S. Army Air Forces Eglin Field, FL on May 31, 1942. He reported to Tuskegee Army Air Field and began Pre-Flight training in July 1942. One of his sisters, Neomi Polkinghorne, joined him in Tuskegee as a Civilian employee at Tuskegee Army Air Field. They are one of a few brother and sister Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen. LT Polkinghorne was assigned to Class 43-B, along with twenty other class Cadets. On August 6, 1942, his Class transferred to Primary Flight Training with thirteen cadets. He successfully completed Basic and at the end of his Advanced training, he was one of seven Cadets still remaining.



On February 16, 1943, in front of family and friends, LT Polkinghorne was proudly commissioned as 2nd LT James R. Polkinghorne, Jr. and received his Silver Wings. His mother and father were proudly present for this celebratory occasion. LT Polkinghorne is the first known Floridian to receive Silver Wings from the Tuskegee Army Air Field.

After a short leave to spend time with family and friends, LT Polkinghorne was assigned to the 301st Fighter Squadron at Selfridge Army Air Field in Michigan. He reported to duty on April 14, 1943. His combat training began in the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk. On May 3, 1943, Lt. Polkinghorne's 301st Fighter Squadron, relocated to Oscoda Army Air Field in Michigan, where the Pilots learned the intricacies of air-to-air and air-to-ground combat skills. In July 1943, the 332nd Fighter Group moved its Squadrons back to Selfridge Army Air Field, Michigan. The 301st Fighter Squadron was gradually moved back to Selfridge too. In the fall of 1943, LT Polkinghorne and his squadron were introduced to training on the P-39 Aircobra. In mid-October, the 332nd Fighter Group received orders to prepare the 301st and 302nd Squadrons for overseas combat. Final phases of training, which included bombing and gunnery training for LT Polkinghorne and his Squadron were completed in November 1943 at Oscoda Army Air Field, Michigan. On November 27, 1943, 2nd LT Polkinghorne was promoted to 1st LT and in early December, the Squadron's final pre-deployment operational training and inspections were completed and approved. The 301st Fighter Squadron arrived at Camp Patrick Henry, Newport News, Virginia on December 25, 1943 ready for overseas deployment. Assigned to the Liberty ship S.S. Clark Mills, the 301st Fighter Squadron departed Hampton Roads, VA for Italy on January 3, 1944. 1st LT Polkinghorne arrived in Taranto, Italy on January 29, 1944.



1st LT Polkinghorne's 301st Fighter Squadron was assigned to Montecorvino Airfield, near the city of Salerno. Initially living in tents surrounded by mud, living conditions improved once they set up headquarters and living areas. While at Montecorvino, 1st LT Polkinghorne had the opportunity to see the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in March 1944. He reported in his letter to family that he saw the volcano was "belching rapidly and could be heard for miles." On March 19, 1944, Operation STRANGLE was initiated with his squadron becoming involved in April 1944 to go on many strafing missions to continuously and simultaneously attack open roads, trains, bridges, motor transportation vehicles, marshaling yards, tunnels, to weaken the Germans capability to attack the Allied ground offensives. 1st LT Polkinghorne was advanced to a Squadron Leader and completed a number of successful strafing missions, along with other missions.

Another Class Of War Birds For U. S.



THURSDAY, Ala.—(UPI)—The graduates of a recent class of cadets at the Tuskegee Army Flying School are shown looking on the type of Gaffney, Birmingham, Ala.; Walter H. Stone, McCook, Miss.; Roy Spenser, Tallahassee, Fla.; and William H. Walker, Chickadee, Okla.

On May 5, 1944, 1st LT Polkinghorne piloted his last mission. He was piloting a P-39Q Aircobra (maybe his plane that he named "Polks Prattle") on a strafing mission through a heavy cloud covered target over Sezze and Terracina, Italy, just south of the Anzio beachhead area. The mission was supporting Operation STRANGLE to disallow the Germans' ability to communicate, supply or reinforce their frontline soldiers that were positioned at or near the Gustav Line. 1st LT Polkinghorne was met with flak bursts and tracers from automatic weapons. He did not come out of the low-level clouds in the target area. He nor his airplane again. 1st LT Polkinghorne was reported missing in action on May 5, 1944. In 1945, he was declared legally dead. Captain Lee Rayford was the Flight Polkinghorne's last mission. In the Missing Air Crew Report, Captain Rayford Polkinghorne was "an exceptionally good Pilot, and was in good physical morning of the flight." The 301st Fighter Squadron Daily Report for May 5, 1st LT Polkinghorne was one of the most popular officers in the squadron. He by his fellow officers, enlisted men and women, and civilian employees. The precise location of his loss is in a diverse area that includes marshland, Mediterranean sea, and a very mountainous terrain around Sezze and Terracina, Italy. There is always hope and prayers that his remains will be found.



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1st LT Polkinghorne is memorialized on the Tablets of the Missing at the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery and Memorial in Nettuno, Italy. He was the first Florida A & M student to become a Tusgee Airman. In 1945, the parents of 1st LT Polkinghorne received posthumously an awarded Purple Heart for the wounds he received that resulted in his death. The Purple Heart along with his U.S. Army Air Corps officer cap, U.S. Army Air Corps earphones, training manual, and official photos are on display in Tallahassee at the Museum of Florida History. Official correspondence states that 1st LT Polkinghorne was awarded an Air Medal, and a World War II Victory Medal in formal recognition of his bravery, heroic service, and ultimate sacrifice to his country. Unfortunately, over the years, those medals may have been misplaced or lost.



On October 30, 1948, a ceremony was held in Tallahassee, FL to unveil a campus housing complex, Polkinghorne Village, named in his honor. The Bachelor of Arts degree and a memorial plaque were also awarded posthumously at this ceremony. There was a military air salute given by the 332nd Fighter Group in honor of 1st LT Polkinghorne. The 1st LT's parents and youngest sister attended these activities at the ceremony. Polkinghorne Village was demolished in 2010. A new 800-unit dormitory was erected on the same site and renamed **LT James R. Polkinghorne, Jr. Village on November 8, 2019**. 1st LT Polkinghorne is one of twelve members of the Tallahassee Wall of Fame. There is a mural of him in downtown Pensacola in the Belmont-Davilliers district.



On April 11, 2024, 1st LT Polkinghorne was honored by the State of Florida, along with ten other Tusgee Airmen. Their names were included in FL HB-1227 - Tusgee Airmen Commemoration Day (TACD), signed into law by the Governor. The TACD Bill designates annually the fourth Thursday in March as a State Holiday to commemorate Tusgee Airmen. 1st LT Polkinghorne was also inducted in the Florida Aviation Hall of Fame in Lakeland, Florida on April 12, 2024. The ceremony was attended by his youngest and only surviving sister, Maggie Polkinghorne Wilson, her son, granddaughter, great grandson, nephew and nephew's wife. *Lost in Heaven - The Story of 1st Lt. James R. Polkinghorne, Jr. USAAF, Early Black Aviation History and the Tusgee Airmen* was authored by Dr. Leo F. Murphy and published in 2018. *Forgotten Souls - The Search For The Lost Tusgee Airmen* was authored by award-winning Investigative Journalist, Cheryl W. Thompson, and published in January 2026. This book includes personal interviews with family and information on 1st LT Polkinghorne along with information on the other twenty-six Tusgee Airmen that went missing in combat during WWII. The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has the case of 1st LT James R. Polkinghorne, Jr. as an active pursuit case. Their goal is to bring all servicemen and women home.

