

Black wings: Black pioneers of aviation

by Rita C. Bobowski
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One pilot was called the "Black Swallow of Death", earning 15 medals from the French government for heroic service during the two world wars. Another became a well-known barnstormer and stunt pilot, whose untimely death only served to heighten her appeal. Two others gained the nickname "The Flying Hobos" for the unorthodox practice of pawning their clothes and belongings to finance a transcontinental flight.

Little known today, these were the black men and women pioneers of flight who overcame formidable odds in the early part of this century and went on to become outstanding aviators and role models for succeeding generations.

Their are stories of perseverance and determination. They were born out of the historic flight of the Wright brothers on December 17, 1903, a flight that sparked a popular enthusiasm for flying and things flight-related. From flying togs to furniture styles, from popular music to international aviation expositions, flying quickly captured the public's imagination.

But in the United States, black men and women found themselves excluded from all aspects of flight.

"There was a pervasive idea that blacks simply lacked the aptitude to fly," says Dr. Von Hardesty, associate curator of aeronautics at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington. Hardesty and his colleague, assistant curator Dominick Pisano, are the organizers of a new exhibition, "Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation", chronicling the rise of blacks in aviation.

"Remember, this was the era of Jim Crow laws, when segregation was the order of the day," Hardesty says. "Not only did blacks suffer severe discrimination, they also, as a

whole, had limited resources, little training and few heroes to pave the way."

But heroes were in the wings in the form of two dedicated and strong-willed individuals who refused to give up. Faced with racial barriers in their own country, Eugene Bullard and Bessie Coleman traveled—Bullard before World War I and Coleman in 1921—to France, where attitudes were more liberal, to receive their pilot training.

Bullard, born in Georgia in 1894, sailed to Europe as a stowaway. He served briefly at the start of World War I as an infantryman with the French Foreign Legion, where he earned the ominous nickname, "Black Swallow of Death". After recovering from serious wounds received at Verdun, he transferred to the French flying corp in 1917. During his lifetime, Bullard was awarded 15 medals from the French government, including the Legion of Honor.

His contemporary, Bessie Coleman, broke into aviation in an occupation that was as romantic as it was perilous—stunt flying. Born 10 years before the Wright brothers' first flight, Coleman worked from the time she was a child—picking cotton and taking in laundry in Texas, working as a manicurist and running a chili parlor in Chicago.

During World War I, she decided to learn to fly, but was quickly turned down for training everywhere she applied. A newspaper editor and publisher encouraged Coleman to travel to France, where she trained with some of the best European flyers.

"Miss Coleman, who is having a special Nieuport scout plan built for her in France, said yesterday that she intended to make flights in this country as an inspiration for people of her race to take up aviation," reported the October 17, 1921, issue of Areal Age Weekly. Coleman earned her pilot's license in 1922

and launched a career as a barnstormer and stunt pilot.

Tragically, when she was 33, Coleman's plane failed to pull out of a dive during an airshow performance in Florida. Both Coleman and her co-pilot were killed.

Inspired by Coleman, Bullard and others like them, blacks began to break into aviation. "Most were unable to buy a plane," Hardesty explains, "or even to rent one. In fact, they were often refused permission to purchase the gasoline they needed. As a result, in the late 1920s, blacks began to group together, pooling their resources."

All-black flying clubs would buy their own planes, train their own members and set up their own operations. The clubs promoted air shows and long-distance flights, activities that helped increase interest in and awareness of aviation.

One of the first black flying clubs in the United States was the Challenger Air Pilots' Association in Chicago. Barred from established airports in Chicago, the club opened its own airstrip in 1933 outside the black township of Robbins, Ill., later moving its flight operations to Harlem Airport in Oaklawn.

"The operator of Harlem Airport, a white man named Fred Schumacker, allowed the club members to fly in and out of his place, a major concession at the time," Hardesty says. In his research for the exhibition and a book to be published this month, Hardesty found that segregation, although severe, "was not universal. At different times and in different ways, concerned whites would step in and lend a helping hand."

One Challenger Association member, Cornelius R. Coffey, became one of the first certified black aircraft mechanics in the country. Recognizing the need for qualified engineers and mechanics,

he founded the Coffey School of Aeronautics in 1937 at Harlem Airport with fellow aviator Willa Brown. Coffey's school was one of the first to offer expert flight instruction to blacks.

Los Angeles rivaled Chicago as a hub of black aviation. In 1929, a small group of aviation enthusiasts there banded together to form the Bessie Coleman Aero Club. Two years later, the club sponsored the first all-black air show in the country, an event that attracted an estimated 15,000 spectators.

Black aviation in Los Angeles achieved its greatest fame in 1932 when the club sponsored the transcontinental flight of James H. Banning and Thomas C. Allen. Allen, a 25-year-old pilot and mechanic, learned of a \$1,000 prize offered to the first black to fly cross country. His major problem: no plane. Thirty-two-year-old Banning, on the other hand, was a skilled stunt pilot who owned a four-year-old plane with a 14-year-old engine that needed some work.

The formed a partnership. Never mind that Banning had flown his "Alexander Eaglerock" a total of 10 minutes and Allen had never been in the plane before—or at least so the story goes.

Their history-making flight from Los Angeles to New York took 21 days; 41 hours and 27 minutes were actually spent in the air. With only \$100 in their pockets for expenses, the team stopped in towns along the way where they had relatives and friends, tossing leaflets over towns at one point and pawning a suit and watch at another, all to raise funds for fuel to reach the next city. They quickly became known as the "Flying Hobos."

In contrast to these aerial vagabonds, C. Alfred Anderson and Dr. Albert E. Forsythe became the first black aviators to complete a round-trip transcontinental flight in 1933 in a systematic and well-financed excursion.

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