

BLACK HISTORY

BLACK WINGS

In May 1939, Dale L. White and Chauncey E. Spencer, two black American flying enthusiasts with the backing of the national Airmen's Association, attempted a cross country flight from Chicago to Washington, D.C. The goal of the mission was to dramatize the quest for wider involvement for black America in aviation. Amid enormous financial and mechanical difficulties, Spencer and White did indeed accomplish their goal. Once they finally reached Washington D.C., the men discovered that there were people willing to listen and take a vested interest in the drive for black American participation in the aviation movement. Spencer and White befriended Edgar Brown, a prominent member of the press corps in Washington, D.C. who introduced them to a man who would later do much in the way of bringing their cause to the forefront of prospective policy issues. The man Spencer and White met was Senator Harry S. Truman, of Missouri.

Upon learning that blacks were not included in the proposed aviation program soon to be enacted by the Civil Aeronautics Authority, Senator Truman showed great surprise. When he became aware that the United States



Tuskegee Army cadets are pictured at a formal assembly. (William R. Thompson)



The first group of black cadets

Army Air Corps forbade the enlistment of black Americans, Senator Truman's astonishment sparked a fire that burned a path all the way up to the Secretary of Defense and eventually, the President of the United States.

Senator Truman decided to direct his efforts toward promoting black America's drive for inclusion in the aviation movement in various ways. In addition to lobbying before President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of Defense Robert H. Hinckley, Truman was able to enlist the Negro press corps of Washington, D.C., which proved to be a powerful tool for spreading awareness and generating interest throughout the entire political community.

During the latter part of 1939, as a direct result of the Spencer and White cross country flight and the lobbying of Senator Harry S. Truman, Congress began to open the door for black American participation in the aviation movement, but only partially. Two laws, crafted under the separate but equal principle of the time were enacted; thus, enabling blacks to enter civilian flight training. The Civilian Pilot Training Act Program authorized certain civilian colleges and universities to conduct student pilot training. The goal of the program was to build a



backlog of competent civilian pilots who could quickly adapt to military training in the event of a national emergency. Six Negro schools were selected to actively participate in the CPTP, they included: Howard University, Delaware State College, Hampton Institute, North Carolina A&T, West Virginia

State College, and Tuskegee Institute. Public Law 18, passed along with the CPTP as the second part of the package, directly addressed the country's need for military aviators. It stated that the United States Government would stock and supply civilian schools by monitoring and dispatching the necessary funds to ensure that mili-

tary standards and regulations were upheld during student flight training. In most cases the military historically conducted flight operations under much stricter laws and regulations than those which governed civilian flying. Though it seemed that the door was opening for black American aviation interests, outside forces continue working to keep it



A flight instructor in the advanced program at Tuskegee briefs primary instructors before a long-distance training flight. (U.S. Air Force)

merely cracked, thereby denying black aviators the opportunity to serve their country as military pilots.

The War Department of the United States hoped that by allowing blacks to participate in the Civilian Pilot Training Act Program, interest in Army Air Corps service would fade. Fortunately, it had exactly the opposite effect. As the number of black aviators who successfully completed the civilian aviation program grew, so too did the desire for these Americans to become candidates for cadet flight training in the Army Air Corps and ultimately commissioned officers and pilots in military service. The government tried to delay serious consideration of this issue by keeping it locked in frivolous debate, but because the threat of war was substantially high for America in 1939-40 the answer to the problem of a growing pilot shortage had to be addressed promptly. Black Americans would have to be given the chance to serve in the Army Air Corps as aviators.

In December 1940, the Army Air Corps presented its plan for the participation of black American volunteers. Enlisted men and officers would be employed in a flying squadron, a base group detachment, weather and communications detachments, and all related flight support services necessary for establishing a separate Air Corps. Many policy makers in Washington D.C. scoffed at the probability of this black American Air Corps ever getting off the ground and waited anxiously to see the project fail miserably. The will to achieve was strong among those entering this highly selective program and black America stood poised, eager to seize the opportunity to serve and excel.

America's first black cadet flying class was inducted into the Army Air Corps' flying school at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama on July 19, 1941 and immediately began primary flight training. The government appropriated the funds necessary to construct the field where cadets would receive basic and advanced flying training, combat techniques, and ultimately their

pilot wings and commissions in the United State Army Air Corps. The War Department decided that blacks serving as support personnel would be trained thoroughly as well, and it assigned this training contract to Chanute Field in Illinois.

The students in cadet flying training classes at Tuskegee Field trained in the BT-13, PT-13, and AT-6 aircraft under the same separate but equal premise that shaped the civilian flying legislation of 1939. The actual training environment, while living up to its separate billing, was anything but equal. The system had more than its share of inherent problems and imperfections. But the determination of the cadets proved to be unyielding as the first class had its wing pinned on March 7, 1942. Once the first class had graduated, succeeding classes were pinning on wings at 4 1/2 week intervals. Upon completion of the rigorous program, the Air Corps' newest pilots joined the 99th Fighter Squadron, and looked ahead to the day when the Army Air Corps would call them to serve their country at the height of the Second World War.

After establishing the program for training black aviators, the Air Corps failed to consider how or where the new pilots would serve, since the overall success of the program was not expected. But as the war effort continued to grow, plans for the utilization of the 99th and its support personnel made expansion inevitable. The 99th Fighter Squadron grew to become the 332d Fighter Group. Finally, it was determined that the skills of the fliers could no longer lie dormant in the Allied effort to defeat the Axis Powers. The 332d Fighter Group, composed of its brave Tuskegee Airmen, was called across the "pond", commonly known as the Atlantic Ocean, to fight and serve in Northern Europe.

FEBRUARY IS
BLACK HISTORY
MONTH

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Is Black History Month All It Should Be?

BY PROFESSOR MCKINLEY BURT

That statement may provoke some readers to conclude, "here we go again, this fellow is always dissatisfied about something". You've got that right! Our condition should compel the most complacent of us toward a heightened awareness that we are not "being all we can be".

This week I am recontacting those schools, public agencies and community programs at which I made presentations last year, and I am saying in effect, "Yes, I read the media accounts or scheduling of your programs for this year's Black History Month". Or where there has already been an initial presentation, "There has been much positive feedback on your activities to date. But what I really want to say and in a most respectful way, is that this meaningful celebration was initiated by the renowned African American historian, Carter G. Woodson, in 1923--however, this is 1993!

The point I wish to make is that our "Beautiful People", The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X and Company, gave to the world a

glorious model of what a real social contract should be about. We do not exclude the courageous contributions of our noble black women like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, or Rosa Parks, they all must be honored, indeed, revered. This tradition must be forwarded into posterity and it shall be, coming as it does from an age-old past where the Greeks said "The Ethiopians are the most noble of people." But, then again, who was it that said, "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

In several of my meetings with groups of students, teachers and business men (including whites)--my "focus group"--an interesting question has been raised. Several times a point has been made to the effect that "Yes, the world should know about the noble social and spiritual contributions of black men and women through the ages. But equally as well in this modern age, the world should know of the magnificent contributions in science and technology. Africans and African Americans have not been exclusively about suffering, marching, being lynched and being assassinated."

What these people made very clear was they had a definite suspicion that most of the educational and social establishment was quite happy to fund presentations or programs that would motivate black youth in the long-suffering tradition of a martyr. But in the thinking and competitive roles of experts in technology and administration, there often was reluctance and foot dragging. It was suggested that, possibly, some individual blacks or organizations simply took the easiest route and opted for the "sure fire" traditional program route. Yes, we must be "vigilant"--and aggressive!

Let me say at this point, there has never been a better friend and supporter of presentations regarding the contributions of African Americans to science than the "U.S. Forest Service." Over the decades and throughout the three Northwestern states and Alaska, they have consistently sponsored relevant seminars and study groups (and in the rest of the country as well). I never fail to use this "role model" in my interface with industry, for Oregon companies are showing an

intense interest in proven methods of reaching, and motivating youths in science at a time when the educational establishment is frantically trying to catch up.

I cite these particulars as I recontact those schools and organizations who would be interested in delivering to their students and the public well documented presentations of the African American contributions to science, mathematics and medicine (take note that it is easier to reach me at home -284-7080) And let me suggest two relevant and highly informative books that can be ordered through the "Looking Glass Bookstore" on SW Taylor; "Black Pioneers of Science & Invention" by Louis Haber, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970, Paper \$5.95, cloth \$17.95. "Black Inventors of America", By McKinley Burt, National Book Company, Portland OR. (current Price on request)

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Stage Performance Of Malcolm X Speech Highlights Black History Month At PCC

"The Ballot or the Bullet," one of Malcolm X's most famous speeches, will be recreated in a one-hour presentation at the end of February to highlight Portland Community College's month-long Black History Month celebrations. Admission is free and the event is open to the public.

Two performances are scheduled: Friday, Feb. 26 at noon in the Rock Creek Campus Forum, Building 3, 17705 N.W. Springville Road, and Saturday evening, Feb. 27, 7 p.m. in the Cascade Campus Auditorium, 705 N. Killingsworth. Reception follows the Cascade Campus performance in the Cascade cafeteria.

Michael Lange, an Oakland, Calif.-based actor, director and playwright, portrays the black nationalist leader who first rose to prominence as a force in the Black Muslim movement in America.

The speech was seen as a departure for Malcolm X, once called the angriest man in America, because it

calls for harmony and unity. The speech was delivered in 1964, and early in 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated in a Harlem auditorium, allegedly due to differences with the Black Muslims.

After the performance, a discussion of Malcolm X's life and work will be led by political activist Kwame Somburu, also from Oakland. Somburu joined Malcolm X's movement, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, when it was founded in 1964. He was also present when the assassination occurred.

Lange said, "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech represents one of Malcolm X's most prolific series of messages to African Americans. ... His views should not be taken lightly. He urged us to take political and economic control of our communities. We must finish the race he was running."