

## **"Tuskegee Airmen Panel"**

**Dr. Alan Gropman (Moderator)**  
**Colonel Elmer Jones**  
**Colonel Charles McGee**  
**Lieutenant Colonel Walter McCreary**

**15 September 2009**

**Dr. Gropman:** Thanks, Jim.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I think this is going to be a very interesting experience for all of us. The Tuskegee Airmen are heroes. The three gentlemen on the stage represent about 13,000 people who served as Tuskegee Airmen during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. We include in that group the pilots from Tuskegee, but also the navigators and the navigator bombardier from the 477<sup>th</sup> Medium Bombardment Wing and we honor from the bottom of our hearts the 10,000 enlisted men who armed the planes, who fixed the airplanes when they were hurt.

I had to explain to a speechwriter for President George W. Bush that when a P-51 was ill, for one reason or another, you didn't put your hands on the fuselage and shout "heal" and that's the way the airplane got fixed. The enlisted men are very important and that's why the enlisted men are recognized on the Tuskegee Airmen Gold Medal.

The Tuskegee Airmen are heroes because they fought wars on, this particular war, World War II, on two fronts. They fought the war against America's enemies abroad -- Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan; but they also fought the war against their enemies at home. They proved something that many Americans, almost all white Americans believed could not be done. The Tuskegee Airmen are true pioneers, no question about that, and their unique record during World War II, having shot down more than 110 airplane sin air-to-air combat, and having successfully escorted bombers for 200 escort missions, their unique record was the main reason, not the only reason, but the main reason the United States Air Force was the first service to racially integrate and did so in 1949, ahead of the other services.

It was armed forces racial integration that led America's racial integration. If you wanted to track that particular reform in America, certainly the most important reform of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you would start with an acorn, the Tuskegee Army Airfield. The Tuskegee Airmen were that acorn that grew into this great oak of racial integration.

The three gentlemen with me on the stage will speak for about five minutes about their experiences. Everybody has a question piece of paper down on their seats. That's the way we're going to do the question and answer period. Somebody will come along and collect those, and I will referee what happens at that point.

The first person I'm going to introduce is the person to my immediate left, and I'll introduce the others after, in sequence. Walter McCreary was a fighter pilot. Somebody came up and asked could he get an autograph from a P-51 pilot, I said we have two on the stage.

Walter McCreary had an experience that several dozen Tuskegee Airmen had of being shot down during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and having been a prisoner of war. Walter will talk about that experience and other experiences he had with the Tuskegee Airmen. Walter?

**LtCol McCreary:** I flew 89 missions and on the 89<sup>th</sup> mission on a strafing, late Valentine near Budapest, my plane, P-51, was hit by antiaircraft which destroyed the radiator. P-51, a liquid cooled engine, did not operate very well without coolant.

I had to bail out about 7,000 feet, landed successfully. We were advised never to crash land a plane because the Germans could use parts, so we all had to bail out when it was necessary.

I landed, tried to put the parachute away, which I was unsuccessful, and eventually I was in a farmyard and a couple of farmers came over to me and shook my hand, I guess they didn't know who I was. But eventually the SS troops arrived on the scene.

From what we had read about the Germans' attitude towards the blacks, there would be hostilities, but there were none. They wanted to know if I had a pistol, which I didn't. We didn't carry pistols in combat in Germany.

We were placed on the train destined for Budapest. Enroute there was an air raid, the train stopped, and the German guards, four of them, gave me their rifles while they went outside to talk. Then I was asked, I'm sitting in a German car with four rifles, why I didn't try to escape. My answer was escape and pass for what?

So eventually the train went on. We arrived in Budapest, into the interrogation room. Was met by a German officer, spoke fluent English. Wanted to know how Colonel

Davis was, how the operation was, asked me questions. He already knew the answer.

The Pittsburgh Courier, a national Negro newspaper, every graduating class had pictures taken, had their history, and the Germans subscribed to this newspaper, so they knew everything about us.

The interrogation didn't exist. I ended up asking the German officers questions about the German Air Force. Eventually I was given a can of beans and a can opener and place on a train, a boxcar, with other prisoners. Eventually sent to Stalag Luft III. There I was disrobed completely, I was dusted down, took a shower, issued new uniforms, a basic uniform with no insignia, then assigned to quarters.

Stalag Luft III had 100,000 officers. It was segregated into five different component sections, and I ended up in the north compound which at one time was British. The other quadrants were filled up so they started putting Americans in with the British.

We had chores. The Germans treated officers very well. We had our assignments. We had a theater which played American music. We had areas where we could walk, exercise, and everything was fine until the Russians began to approach the camp. Then we had to move to the nearest railhead. Then we were transferred to Nuremburg to a camp adjacent to the Marshalling Yards. Each time there was a raid, the bombers came over the camp and we had to take a plank wrapped around with a blanket over our heads just to protect us from shrapnel that was falling.

Okay, I've got a lot of time and it's all diminished. But the Germans treated me the same as all the other POWs. And it wasn't until I got off the plane in New York that a sign says, colored one way, whites the other way. In Germany I never knew who I was racially. There was never any race, any record relative to race.

I guess that's about all I can say in the time I'm limited.

**Dr. Gropman:** Walt's going to be here for questions.

The next gentleman that's going to speak, Walt retired from the United States Air Force as a lieutenant colonel.

The next gentleman sitting next to Walt is Elmer Jones. Elmer Jones is the first Tuskegee Airman. He was trained at Howard University to be a pit pilot and asked to volunteer because he was a graduate engineer to be the maintenance

officer for the newly yet to be formed 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, later Fighter Squadron.

Elmer went to Chanute Army Airfield. He therefore represents, in a sense, the enlisted people. He arrived at Chanute Army Airfield more than six months before Benjamin Davis and the first flying cadets arrived at Tuskegee Army Airfield.

Elmer?

**Colonel Jones:** I'm a Washingtonian, graduated from Howard University in 1941. I had a degree in electrical engineering.

In addition to that I won the private pilot's license through the government's civilian pilot training program. That was a program where the government was going to develop 20,000 pilots and give a big kick to our overall aviation program.

In addition to my formal degree I joined the ROTC program so that I was awarded a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant's commission in the Infantry.

Now each of these elective activities was significant on the career that I would pursue. World War II was raging in Europe and it looked as if the United States would become involved very shortly.

Just as I was about to order, I received an order from the Army to report to the 366<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. After an appeal to some of my influential contacts, I was granted a delay sufficient for me to qualify for a degree, and that was, I was very happy about that. Not only did I want to finish my formal training as an engineer, but I was keeping a view of what was happening in the area of the Air Force because I really wanted to be in the Air Force. By that time I had already gotten a pilot's license with the civilian pilot training program.

Meanwhile there was vigorous debate between the Air Corps and the Army as to whether African Americans would be accepted in pilot training. In spite of the aerial abilities demonstrated by the black students in the CPTP program, the Army held fast to the conclusions that had been reached by a, in a 1929 Army Staff School study, that blacks would act gallantly in combat and it didn't have the physical stamina to be a pilot. So they were against the program to teach blacks how to fly.

Since the Army would not yield in its position, the NAACP with James C. Williams as the Plaintiff, he was one of

my classmates, filed a suit against the Army to accept blacks in the Air Corps. Now the case did not go to trial because in January, 1941, the Army announced its plan to organize a single segregated fighter unit designated the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. It was to be based at a field being built for them in Alabama, near Tuskegee.

In early 1941 specialized ground support personnel were recruited and assigned to Chanute Field for training in all technologies and skills necessary to support a fighter squadron in the theater of operations.

By the end of 1941 the trainees were transferred from Chanute Field to their new base at Tuskegee, Alabama. It was called Tuskegee Army Air Field.

During this program of training at Chanute, five aviation cadets were also trained to become officers to supervise maintenance, communications, and armament activities of the squadron. I was one of those cadets trained for maintenance assignments.

The recruiting of well qualified candidates in such a short period of time was made possible by G.O. Washington of Tuskegee Institute who developed a close relationship with the Air Corps during negotiations for primary flight training contract which they won and other aspects of how to obtain or recruit these enlisted men in order to show that aspect of the service.

After a period of training and outfitting the 99<sup>th</sup> was declared ready for combat in September 1942, but shipment was delayed until April 12<sup>th</sup> before the Air Corps could decide where and how to deploy us. The problem was that we were a single segregated squadron where the basic combat organization was the group consisting of at least three squadrons and a service squadron designated for support.

In the case of the 99<sup>th</sup>, a small unit of 35 military technicians and two officers was attached to provide the higher support levels of supply and maintenance which were needed by the squadron. The 99<sup>th</sup> and support units were shipped to North Africa on April 16, 1943 and arrived in Casa Blanca April 24<sup>th</sup>.

On July 2, 1943, Lieutenant Charles Hall shot down a Focke Wulf and became the first African American to score a victory in aerial combat against the enemy. So we became a part of the law in that sense and did an excellent job with our contribution. It's the contribution of the enlisted men which is very often overlooked, but they were outstanding people and we did an outstanding job. Thank you.

**Dr. Gropman:** Thanks, Elmer.

Sitting to the left of Elmer is Charles McGee, Colonel, United States Air Force retired. Charles McGee holds the record for flying the most fighter combat sorties of any individual in any United States military. More than 100 missions in World War II, 100 missions in Korea, more than 100 missions in Vietnam. Nobody else has flown as many combat fighter sorties.

Charles had many commands outside of the United States. That was a patent, that was a policy, many commands outside the United States including a tactical recon squadron in Vietnam in which he flew 100 missions over North Vietnam and other missions as well.

His very last assignment was inside the United States. The policy had changed, but in many cases too late for many of the Tuskegee Airmen. He was the base commander of Richards Gabauer. Charles?

**Colonel McGee:** Thank you, Dr. Gropman, and good morning ladies and gentlemen.

I got words of a program going. Colonel Jones had mentioned to you that the mechanics were trained at Chanute Field. That was part of the Army policy, and their statement was we can't use a black pilot until we have black mechanics, so the mechanics training led the way and that's how I heard about the program because I was enrolled at the University of Illinois at the time.

By the way, I was in Pershing Rifles and got to handle a rifle pretty well, and kind of understood what infantry, ground pounding would be all about, and was convinced that I should apply for the pilot program.

So while Elmer was in training I took the exams early in 1942 and passed them. Physical and mental exam. Then sat back to wait for the call because, as he said, they were building Tuskegee Army Airfield and that was going to be the location for black pilot training.

I decided, I'd met a young lady on campus, and you know how that goes. Still waiting to get into the war. We finally said let's go ahead and get married, so we got married on a Saturday and Monday morning's mail had that letter, report.

So I went south to Tuskegee Army Airfield. After that first flight in the PT-17, I knew I'd made the right decision. I fell in love with flying.

Yes, I'm an old fighter pilot, but I also became, after my combat in Europe, a twin engine instructor. Following that they said well, you can't just fly all the time, you've got to do something, so I followed on after Colonel Jones and went to the Aircraft Maintenance Officers School at Chanute Field. Upon completing that, just as the Air Force was about to close Logburn, I never went back to work there, I went to my first integrated in Smoky Hill Air Base, Salina, Kansas.

Work went fine. I was respected for my combat experience and my ability to lead the maintenance troops in the base shops there, but at that timeframe, 1948, there was no place for a black family in Salina if you weren't already a native of that area. So my family never got to Salina.

I was moved as they retrenched the bomb wing there, was shifted to Barksdale Air Base in Louisiana. Well, I wasn't happy about going to Barksdale because while I was at Logburn as the Assistant Base Operations Officer, Chappy James and I went to Barksdale to attend the Instrument Instructors School. While there they gave us some special assignments because the Army policy of having a black service squadron on the far side of the field, they couldn't bowl, couldn't go to the swimming pool, et cetera. But we could go over and talk to them about venereal disease. Mentalities were something at that time.

Fortunately, after I close the base shops at Salina my orders said go to Riverside, California rather than Barksdale. Well, Riverside wasn't any better than Salina, as far as the family being able to locate, that is a black family being able to locate housing around March Field. But there was a farmer on the far side of town that had a couple of houses on his property and we had a very comfortable home while there.

But it didn't take long for the Air Force system to work and they filled overseas assignments out of the population based on how many months you'd been back home from combat in Europe, so I wasn't there too long and found myself on the way to the Philippines as a maintenance officer.

Well, there were so many maintenance officers on that boat that when I got to the Philippines they assigned me to base operations. But you know, that happened to be the time that we said we're going to support our allies and the United Nations and get in the fight in Korea. So we didn't have our jets in place to support that and they immediately called on the P-51 pilots. So there I am again in another conflict, P-51.

I can tell you more about the experiences that I had getting into jet flying in the Philippines after Korea and the rest of my career, but Dr. Gropman gave you a little bit of an idea of that so we'll wait and answer your questions.

**Dr. Gropman:** Thanks, Charles.

It's important to understand the limitations, and Walter is just beginning to hint at the limitations while talking about the fact that he didn't experience segregation when he was in Stalag Luft, but he certainly did as he walked off the airplane back in the United States.

If you were a white fighter pilot in World War II, you went home after 70 missions to train others. But if you were black, you did not go home. Charles flew more than 130. There were Tuskegee Airmen who flew more than 210. So understand, that's the way discrimination worked in World War II. That could really bite, couldn't it? And you learned a lot about the other discriminations that Charles had to face at various bases in which the United States Army Air Forces and the way the United States Air Force did not help. Understand that.

We have a bunch of questions. If you have questions, we'll see if they can work their way up here, but I will ask a question that I have heard asked of these gentlemen many times. This is for all panel members. The question is this. What drove or motivated you to fight for a country that did not accept you as an equal citizen?

**LtCol McCrary:** Having graduated from college at now Tuskegee, I received greetings from the draft board in San Antonio, Texas. Not wanting to be what we called a ground pounder, Tuskegee at that time was selected one of the five colleges to participate in the civilian pilot training program. I took it and got civilian pilot license, then made applications for the Army Air Corps to become a cadet. That was my reasoning for becoming involved in aviation.

I did not want to have a career that would end nowhere. Aviation at that time, even under combat conditions, had the promise of attaining a goal, an objective, and I made the decision.

**Colonel Jones:** I wasn't too interested in political things as I was growing up, and even after I reached college. I was fascinated by technical things and my father used to build radios so I started building radios, then I got involved in hobbies, an amateur radio operator at a very young age. I used to build model airplanes. So you could see that I was thinking more of my own interests and ambitions than I was about the country as a whole.

So I followed my instincts, my interest in the various fields that were open to me and so I wanted a radio education in college but my Dean at Howard University said they don't have that. But electrical engineering, power, was more their thing. So I didn't get directly into radio, but I did have a hobby of amateur radio. Then I was building model airplanes and then later in high school my tutor encouraged me to get more involved in airplanes and of course I consider myself to be a pilot. I think everybody aspired to be a pilot, at least most of the younger people did, but I couldn't see a straight line to getting into that, so I was building model airplanes.

So you can see that I guess I was more interested in my own problems, things were not so bad in Washington, D.C. where I lived, so the segregation problem wasn't a big one for me. I had good opportunities and I followed my desire to be in a technical field. So you can see from my background that I pursued that a lot more than I was about the future of the country.

**Colonel McGee:** My background and action came from a desire I guess both from church activity, from participating in Boy Scouts, that I should treat other people like I wanted to be treated, and so that was my approach to dealing with others. At the same time our country had come out of ten years of Depression. Working in the military was a job that was pretty good pay for that timeframe, and I was just as eager as anybody else to be able to draw that paycheck and what that meant at that timeframe. And certainly, as I mentioned earlier, having that first flight and getting into a field that was very exhilarating certainly kept me going, and with that approach that we could march ahead and hope that folks would begin to treat you equally was kind of the goal.

I didn't have any buddies. In fact I don't think any of us who were part of the Tuskegee experience say that we got together and said let's go down there in Alabama and do something and show the world. Take over. It wasn't the approach. It was more individual advancement and opportunity.

**Dr. Gropman:** Locating the flying program in Tuskegee, Alabama was no gift to black people. It was a very hostile environment. The institute was there, no question, but that in many cases also invoked hostility from the people who really controlled the power in that town.

As a leader, what was your most challenging moment, and how did you handle it either in World War II or after?

**Colonel McGee:** As far as leadership is concerned, one of the things that I felt was quite a task at having to rate other officers, and one of the toughest tasks I had was to rate a technician who was in the unit that had definitely shown some racist attitudes. But I realized that that attitude should not be a direct part of his performance. He was a technician, and that's what I had to rate him on. So to overcome that thought or desire to downgrade him because of attitude, and I felt well, the best way to do is talk to him about it and hopefully bring about a change in time rather than affect a career in a way that wasn't appropriate.

**Colonel Jones:** I think my training in the ROTC, Reserve Officer Training, we were being developed supposedly as leaders and I went to camp and I got to be a corporal and in my high school I participated in the Cadet Corps. I got to be the top officer in my high school.

There was a rival cadet, I guess it was a battalion or something in the high school across the street. We had various competitions. And we did very well in those competitions. I think I learned a lot about leadership, and I always had a lot of consideration for the people under me.

I found out later that I was well respected as a leader and I did try to do whatever was best for my troops.

**LtCol McCreary:** Having grown up in Texas, educated in Alabama, I knew my place. With this position I could lead, knowing the obstacles, the results.

After integration I was Deputy Director of Statistics and Data Processing for Headquarters, Air Force Security Service where the majority of subordinates were white. I could use the experience of segregation, and even though I was in a position of leadership, I could maneuver around to where my directions were accepted and the program was successful.

**Dr. Gropman:** One of Elmer's challenges was that he had a very active wife, Frankie Jones, who was responsible in many communities in America, but most responsible in Massachusetts when Elmer was stationed at Hanscom Air Force Base after the war, in seeing that the laws of integrated housing were obeyed. And Frankie Jones was a pioneer and a successful one at that. Taking down that particular challenge.

There was a question that I think I could answer, I answered part of it anyway, the question is did the Airmen fly both the P-51C and D? Yes, they did. The next question

I'll let Walt and Charles answer. Did you prefer the C or the D model?

**LtCol McCreary:** One had a canopy that opened this way. The D had a canopy that was a bubble that you could pull a string and it would go up. I said that because after I was shot by anti-aircraft I got out of the plane easy because of the automatic ejection of the bubble. This was on a P-51D.

**Colonel McGee:** From a combat point of view I didn't find that much difference between the two, however certainly to me there was a bit of preference for the D model because of that bubble canopy and your visibility that you had. We used to say a good fighter pilot was a swivel neck, and you really had that opportunity in the D model because you didn't have that armor plate and communication box behind your head. You could actually turn around as far as you could twist, you could see back. That was certainly an advantage for a fighter pilot because we didn't have the radar some of you are flying with now and can see something out there before they can see you and that type of thing. We had to see and be seen. So the D model I think would get the nod.

**Dr. Gropman:** Here's a question for all three. What is your most memorable moment during World War II or after. Either a good memorable moment or a bad memorable moment from World War II on. Besides being shot down. That one's fixed in your memory, right? [Laughter].

**LtCol McCreary:** It was after integration. I was always the black spot on any assignment. At headquarters I was the only Negro, black. If I went to a convention representing the major commands, I was only the one. And you have to learn to live with that. As a southerner I could appreciate being ignored, it didn't hurt that bad, but I had to accept it if I was going to be accepted and promoted.

If I tried on an individual basis to fight segregation, I would end up out of a job. So --

**Dr. Gropman:** Having to deal with that is burned in your memory.

**LtCol McCreary:** Well, I got along better than Elmer or some of the other Tuskegee Airmen from the north. I grew up in the south. The implications of being black was part of my training, part of my heritage, and if I was going to succeed I couldn't be a crusader of one.

**Colonel McGee:** Memorable moments to me come with the trust that we had to have. There has been acknowledgement

that we don't often give credit to the mechanics and technicians that put the plane in shape for what we pilots do. But also our relationship as crew members.

Is Tom Kuny still in the audience? Folks, Tom Kuny was my backseater in my last mission in Vietnam, my 173<sup>rd</sup> mission. The trust we had with that person in the back as a pilot in front, we were flying the airplane but that person got us to the target when we let down. So a memorable moment for me is flying in weather and the backseater tells you you've got it, you can keep going, you can go through that valley, and if he was wrong, we wouldn't be here. We had folks like Tom that got us back home. We should never forget that.

That was the memorable moment. I guess the hairiest moment in flying all the aircraft that I flew from the early piston engine aircraft onto the jet age is what it means to believe in the instruments that are in front of you.

We had night refueling F-4s, but it was one of those days where there were high cirrus clouds, no moon. So you had no horizon. We got to the rendezvous point and the tanker was late. And folks, after that third orbit if you aren't an instrument flyer you don't come home. We lost another aircraft and a crew. A strong believer there.

I would like to say one last word on leadership. Folks, as you move along it's not the rank on your shoulders that's important, but it's the attitude and respect that those people under you have for you as a person. They go together, but if you're relying only on that rank you've got some work to do.

**Colonel Jones:** Naturally I didn't live as exciting a life as my pilot friends here. I loved being in the service, in the Air Force. I can say that I got every measure of respect and confidence in that I would apply for various schools and I would get the assignment. It might be that they just wanted to get rid of me, but I think it worked in my favor. I got a Master's degree from the University of Chicago, a Master's degree from the University of Illinois. I applied for those opportunities and they would usually come through 100 percent.

Living in Washington, D.C., there are a number of enclaves throughout the District of Columbia where there was a colored area and a white area and so on and so forth. But that too I think worked in my favor in that I went through a school system that attracted the most competent teachers and Howard University drew professors from a number of places. So I think I was so lucky to be in that situation. Everything seemed to be going my way. I think that

situation helped me to get along and be relatively successful in my career.

**Dr. Gropman:** We're obligated to leave this room in four minutes, so I told the obergrupin fuehrers who run this that I would take the last question. That way I can count on reading my watch and getting out.

But a question that was asked, an interesting question, is what was the application process for pilot training into the Tuskegee program.

Many people erroneously say that what happened at Tuskegee during World War II was an experiment, and they call it the Tuskegee Experiment. You didn't hear that from any of the gentlemen here, because it wasn't an experiment. There was no experiment. Black people had proven that they could fly to anybody with two eyes prior to World War II. It wasn't an experiment. It was really tied up in a great deal of American domestic politics with Franklin Roosevelt. He ordered the organization into being, and once that happened, people who had yearned to fly were able to get into the program by applying for it. There were applications sent out.

Benjamin Davis, when he was at West Point applied for pilot training, graduated in 1936. There were no segregated pilot organizations. Each time he applied he was turned down.

When President Roosevelt ordered the 99<sup>th</sup> to be created, they came looking for Benjamin Davis, and they did, they found him at Fort Riley. He was serving as an aide de camp to his father at that particular moment. So he gets to be the commander of the 99<sup>th</sup> that way.

There was a rush to fill the 99<sup>th</sup>. The 99<sup>th</sup> would have more than enough pilots to fly all of the airplanes all of the time. The other three units that flew fighter aircraft, the 100<sup>th</sup>, the 301<sup>st</sup> and 302<sup>nd</sup> were right behind them. They needed a lot of people for that. Then they created a medium bombardment group that had two pilots for each one. The 477<sup>th</sup> Medium Bombardment Group.

The application process to get into these programs was the same as it was for white people. And the same exams were taken, but with different results.

The United States Army Air Forces was determined to man those organizations. The four fighter squadrons got into combat during World War II and has, as I alluded to in the very beginning, a unique mission. They were uniquely successful.

No white unit had a better in commission rate than the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group. The 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group could produce airplanes for missions the same as any other organization. The Tuskegee Airmen were uniquely successful in escorting bombers to the point where the white bomber outfits asked for the Tuskegee Airmen to escort them.

Ben Davis' nose [odd] was Agatha Joe. That was the name of his airplane initially. Agatha Josephine, his wife's name. But he changed it in 1944 to By Request, because the white organizations requested the Tuskegee Airmen because of their unique successes.

So let me end with that. We ended with an integrated Air Force and look at the audience. We have white people and blue, we have black people and blue, and the people on this stage are the major reason for that.

I'll close with that and thank you for your attendance.

[Applause].

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