"The Air is the Only Place Free from Prejudice": An Interrogation of Myths in History, the Tuskegee Airmen, and Black Pilots' Legacy in World War II and the American Armed Forces

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On a flight with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Tuskegee Airmen chief flight instructor C. Alfred Anderson remembered, "She told me, 'I always heard Negroes couldn't fly, and I wondered if you'd mind taking me up."Her escorts were all furious and told her she shouldn't do it.... When we returned, she told us, 'Well, you can fly all right.' 'Franklin, I flew with those boys down there, and you're going to have to do something about it,' she remarked when she got home[1]. When First Lady Roosevelt found the training center, she was visiting the Institute hospital to inspect a polio treatment facility at the request of her husband, the president, who was infected with the disease[2]. She was astonished to see jets darting through the skies outside the institute, and she was even more surprised to hear that all of the planes around her were operated by black people[3]. She inquired about the institute's leadership, met Chief Anderson, and boarded an aircraft with him on that fateful flight[4]. And she did return after her flight to Washington to help in the drive to persuade the president to lift the ban on black pilots serving in the Army Air Corps[5]. This flight for Roosevelt happened to be one of the watershed moments in assisting black aviators in their efforts to serve, but it also demonstrates how segregated the Army was at the time. It is an example of someone at the highest level of society reporting on an unsubstantiated scientific finding on a group of people, citizens of the very country she represents.

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[1] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation* (Boston Mass.: Branden Books, 2008).
[2] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[3] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[4] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[5] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*

Eleanor Roosevelt and C. Alfred Anderson, 1941

It begs the issue of where this idea of black pilots' incapacity to fly came from, and what impact it had on the efforts of black aviators in general, not just Tuskegee. Racism in this country has historically been based on fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of what is beyond comprehension, and fear of what is unlike. This fear drove a settler-colonial population to violently remove a group of indigenous peoples from the land they arrived on, to forcibly abduct, transport, and enslave millions of African people on said land, and to attack and rebuke them for not being docile and aligning themselves with the plans of a nation that was not built to support them. This fear, like all of them, has led to misinformation, indifference, and outright hatred, all of which can be seen in the information spread about groups such as black and formerly enslaved people, and information similar to what First Lady Roosevelt purportedly assumed about black pilots. One can only speculate on what it means that the woman and lauded philanthropist who is married to the man serving in the highest office believed black people couldn't fly enough that

she felt comfortable saying it aloud and curious enough about the truth to inquire about it on her own. What does this mean for black pilots everywhere who have met versions of similar bias that may not have gone as well as Chief Anderson's trip with the first lady? Nonetheless, black pilots existed and soared in the skies throughout American aviation history. They continued to serve despite the prevalent prejudices about their talents, which had such a profound impact on their realities. In this paper, I will investigate and interrogate the lives and legacies of John Robinson, Willa Brown, and the Tuskegee Airmen to determine what compelled them to serve in the sky, even in the face of such prejudice, and what it says about our American republic that willing and courageous soldiers were barred and restricted from service based on false myths about their valor.

The 1920s were an era of mass change for the United States: cars, radios, and telephones were used ubiquitously for the first time. Despite the fact that the United States had gone through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and World War, racism remained a pervasive problem[6]. This bigotry permeated all facets of society, including the armed forces, where numerous African-Americans had previously tried and been denied enlistment[7]. A report from the U.S. Army War College in 1925 called "the Use of Negro Manpower in War" criticized the desire to serve and, for many black pilots, to fly[8]. The report's authors and authors' subjects were all white[9]. Seven years after World War I ended, this assessment assessed black soldiers' readiness for future conflicts[10]. The report is comprehensive, with a consistent focus on the value of white

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[6] Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).
[7] Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson*
[8] "Chapter 1 - the Use of Negro Manpower," history.army.mil, 1925, https://history.army.mil/html/documents/coldwar/integr_usareur/ch01.html.
[9] "Chapter 1 - the Use of Negro Manpower," history.army.mil, 1925, https://history.army.mil/html/documents/coldwar/integr_usareur/ch01.html.
[10] "Chapter 1 - the Use of Negro Manpower," history.army.mil, 1925, https://history.army.mil/html/documents/coldwar/integr_usareur/ch01.html.

commanders, the need for rigorous segregation, and the general unsuitability of black men for military service in any capacity other than combat. The report strongly opposes placing black soldiers in command positions, especially those that would put them above white soldiers, but it is ambiguous as to what role black soldiers would play in the heat of battle.

There are lines that stand out as obscenely overt in its racism, specifically in the selected conclusions at the end of the report which states: "In the process of evolution the American negro has not progressed as far as the other sub-species of the human family. As a race he has not developed leadership qualities. His mental inferiority and the inherent weaknesses of his character are factors that must be considered with great care in the preparation of any plan for his employment in war. . . .In the past wars the negro has made a fair laborer, but an inferior technician. As a fighter he has been inferior to the white man even when led by white officers. . . .Negro soldiers as individuals should not be assigned to white units. . . .
Negro officers should not be placed over white officers, noncommissioned officers or soldiers. . . .Negro officer candidates should attend training camps with white candidates. They should have the same instructors, take the same tests and meet the same requirements for appointment as officers as the white candidates. They should be sheltered, messed, and instructed separately from white candidates. . . the eventual use of the negro will be determined by his performance in combat training and service. . . . If the negro makes good the way is left open for him to go into combat eventually with all-negro units."[11] The selected assumptions section of the report includes even more details on what the thinking was in the military units, including this section that states: "It is generally recognized that the pure blood American negro is inferior to our white population in mental capacity. . . . The cranial cavity of the negro is smaller than the white; his

[11] "Chapter 1 - the Use of Negro Manpower," history.army.mil, 1925, https://history.army.mil/html/documents/coldwar/integr_usareur/ch01.html.

brain weighing 35 ounces contrasted with 45 for the white. All officers, without exception, agree that the Negro lacks initiative, displays little or no leadership, and cannot accept responsibility. Some point out that these defects are greater in the Southern Negro. . . .Due to his susceptibility to 'Crowd Psychology' a large mass of negroes, e.g., a division, is very subject to panic. Experience had indicated that the negroes produce better results by segregation and cause less trouble. Grouping of negroes generally in the past has produced demands for equality, both during war and after demobilization. . . . An opinion held in common by practically all officers is that the negro is a rank coward in the dark. His fear of the unknown and unseen will prevent him from ever operating as an individual scout with success. His lack of veracity causes unsatisfactory reports to be rendered, particularly on patrol duty. . .The negro needs trained leadership far more than the white man needs it, and above all they need leaders in whom they have confidence, and whose presence they can feel and see at all times. . . ."[12]. That last phrase, which is stunning in that it isn't, reflects very simply on the twisted relationship existing in American chattel slavery and how it has tinted racism in the United States ever since its advent. It suggests that these white officers, like overseers or masters on a plantation, are required to "set the black soldiers straight, so to speak, robbing them of any agency and knowledge.

By the time First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was repeating it in all seriousness to a black pilot who would go on to become one of the most decorated military pilots of all time, the 67-page report had effectively set the tone for how black men should be treated in the military by officers of the Armed Forces, by those looking to recruit them, and by the public[13]. It was sweeping and deeply racist, encompassing the entire military and armed forces, including the

[12] "Chapter 1 - the Use of Negro Manpower," history.army.mil, 1925, https://history.army.mil/html/documents/coldwar/integr_usareur/ch01.html.

[13] Walt Napier, "A Short History of Integration in the US Armed Forces," www.af.mil, July 1, 2021, https://www.af.mil/News/Commentaries/Display/Article/2676311/a-short-history-of-integration-in-the-us-armed-forces/.

flying units, with a line claiming that black pilots lacked the discipline and intelligence necessary to fly an airplane[14]. Long after its release, this report continued to serve as the basis for racist regulations that prevented black pilots and potential military members from participating in sectors outside of labor units. The United States had long advocated racist practices, thus black residents were already accustomed to the idea that blacks couldn't take up space, both figuratively and metaphorically, without actively doing so themselves. The "grandfather of the Tuskegee Airmen," John Robinson, was a pilot and educator who was prepared to do just that. During the Second Italo-Ethiopian War in 1935, Ethiopia, as one of the few sovereign countries on an otherwise occupied African continent, continually fought for its independence[15]. The 1885 Partition of Africa and the ensuing battle of Adwa in 1896, in which Italian forces were destroyed under the leadership of Emperor Menelik II, made this position conceivable[16]. This war was a notable triumph in the face of the European continent's ongoing imperialist conquests; it signaled a shift in the position of African nations, whom other empires considered as nothing more than a location to expand their own frontiers. The second Italian conquest was an attempt to reclaim control of lands formerly occupied by Ethiopia[17]. With the emergence of fascism in leadership, the world's attention was drawn to Ethiopia, a country whose people had long maintained their will and will to be independent despite being dominated by a foreign entity[18]. Notwithstanding the fact that Ethiopia was governed by a foreign entity, the world's attention was drawn to the country.[19] This emotion was shared by black people across the African

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[14] "Chapter 1 - the Use of Negro Manpower," history.army.mil, 1925, https://history.army.mil/html/documents/coldwar/integr_usareur/ch01.html.
[15] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[16] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[17] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[18] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[19] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).

continent and diaspora, who saw kinship in the Ethiopian people's aspiration for independence[20]. Among these figures was John Robinson, a pilot from Gulfport, Mississippi, who later became known as "the father of the Tuskegee Airmen."[21]

Maggie L. Walker, the first black woman to charter a bank in 1903, felt her achievement would pave the way for future black success. "I am only a woman; at best in a few short years my sun will have set," she said, describing herself and the incident. But when my time comes to rest, I will do so knowing that I have worked hard all my life, not just to construct this massive brick structure that looms over us, but also with the goal of creating jobs for the local women and children."[22] She had no idea that a child named John Robinson, born not too far away in Carabell, Florida, would one day go on to make her dream a reality[23]. Gulfport, Mississippi is the state's second-largest city and is home to the United States Navy Atlantic Fleet Seabees, where John Robinson spent his childhood[24]. Robinson witnessed a biplane flying over Gulfport when he was seven years old, and that was the first time he ever remembered wanting to fly[25]. John Moisant, afterwards renowned as the "King of the Aviators," piloted the plane[26]. Researchers such as Thomas E. Simmons, in his novel titled *The Brown Condor,* note this as one of Robinson's first reported memories of wanting to fly[27]. Yet, African-American citizens in Gulfport were barred from pursuing their education beyond their sophomore year of high

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[20] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[21] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[22] "Maggie L Walker National Historic Site (U.S. National Park Service)," www.nps.gov, n.d., https://www.nps.gov/mawa/learn/historyculture/memorable-quotes-from-maggie-l-walker.htm#:~:text=%22What%20do%20we%20need%20to.
[23] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[24] Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).
[25] Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).
[26] Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).
[27]Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).

school.[28] This was the first of many setbacks inflicted on him by a state that barred those who looked like him from acquiring a suitable education. His zeal for the advancement of machines and technology was realized in high school, when he advanced his studies. Robinson opted to further his studies by enrolling in the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, a historically black college located in Tuskegee, Alabama, where he subsequently relocated. This would come back to him later in his career; the yearning to soar and progress being restrained by the state, and Robinson using the only means of change he had, his location, and migrating himself to chase a better opportunity[29]. Tuskegee is where he learned auto mechanical science, as well as math, science, and history, all of which are necessary for a well-rounded pilot; however, after completing his education and beginning to seek out opportunities in aviation, specifically at the burgeoning Curtiss-Wright School of Aviation in Chicago, he was repeatedly denied. Despite the fact that he would not be permitted to work there as a student, Robinson elected to work there as a janitor, unofficially auditing classes until he ultimately became the school's first black student and was recognized as a complete student[30]. This moment is not merely a Hallmark moment demonstration of his instructor's goodwill in assisting his acceptance after he had been refused on the basis of race for so long, but also Robinson's drive and desire to be a pilot. While auditing classes, Robinson also founded the Aero Study Group, which was made up of other Wright School employees who were similarly interested in aviation and managed to build his own airplane, which the instructor who accepted him, Bill Henderson, was so impressed with that he gave him a slot at the school[31]. Not only did his cleverness prove to be the reason he was admitted into school, but his other group members also managed to secure a place. His devotion

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[28] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[29] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[30] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[31] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).

to not just the reality of what he sought to learn but also to the individuals he brought with him proved to be a strength, not a weakness. This would continue to be true. This passion to educate and give back became a defining feature of his career as an aviator. In his book, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson*, Phillip Thomas Tucker writes that after his experiences with the Aero Study Group, with Cornelius Coffey, Robison founded the Challengers Air Pilots Association for their fellow African Americans who also wanted to fly, which was later expanded to their own airfield in Illinois, for all students regardless of race, the John Robinson School of Aviation. Robinson went to Tuskegee to convince them to construct an aviation school within the Institute, which would become the home of the Tuskegee Airmen, because of the institution's effectiveness in mobilizing and giving opportunities for black students with an interest in aviation. It was clear that "his own success was not enough" for him. More work needed to be done all around the country, and maybe even the world, for him[32].

In 1935, John Robinson, who was living in Chicago near the Robinson Aviation School, announced his intention to volunteer to defend Ethiopia at a meeting of the Associated Negro Press[33]. He was inspired by the Second Italo-Ethiopian War and the struggles taking place in that part of the diaspora. Several in attendance, including Dr. Melaku Bayen, a cousin of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, were affected and astounded by the news[34]. Bayen knew the Mississippi pilot who taught black pupils and built his own plane[35]. After a discussion with Robinson, Bayen recommended him to his cousin due to his skill and experience, which led in the Emperor of Ethiopia giving an official invitation and commission to John Robinson to serve as an officer in

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[32] Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).

[33] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).

[34] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).

[35] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).

the Ethiopian Air Force. Robinson and his fellow pilots were aware of the predicament of their Ethiopian brothers and sisters in exile across the diaspora and felt sympathetic to their cause. This made Robinson's choice to accept both unfathomable and precisely the type of chance he had hoped for throughout his aviation career[36]. They did, however, fight for independence and civil rights at home in their own distinct ways. At the time, prospects for black aviators were exceedingly restricted, if not entirely nonexistent[37]. This was particularly true in the United States Army Air Force, where blacks were not permitted to serve[38]. With the surge in lynchings in the United States and Robinson's ambition to raise the number of black pilots worldwide, Robinson regarded the commission as a chance to effect change and progress above his circumstances[39]. There was also the sense that in shifting the experiences of black people abroad, he would be affecting black political consciousness across the diaspora[40]. He also regarded the commission as a vehicle by which he could further achieve his goal of increasing the number of black pilots across the world[41]. The opportunity became not only the chance of affecting this war that which John Robinson himself felt personally connected to and affected by, but a space for John Robinson to imagine something greater than the circumstances he was given in the United States[42].

The situation Robinson walked into in Ethiopia was intricate[43]. Robinson meets similar challenges in establishing his authority and prestige in a foreign place as he did back home[44]. Newspaper and media coverage of his presence covers the widespread interest in, and some of

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[36] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[37] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[38] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[39] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[40] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[41] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[42] Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).
[43] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).
[44] Thomas E Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor* (Skyhorse, 2012).

the criticism of, his entrance, even from people much like himself. Fellow black aviator Herbert Julian, called “the Black Eagle of Harlem” attacked John Robinson in Addis Abeba in August after Robinson had replaced him in the Air Force[45]. The Emperor had ordered Julian to leave the country, showing his support for his decision to bring Robinson into the country, a decision that was supported by the country when Robinson dazzled the Ethiopian people with his flying skills[46]. It was appropriate then, that soon after that, Robinson was name commander of the Ethiopian Air Force. The Air Force itself was not large; it was made up of two dozen aircraft at the time, and all of them were without weapons, but Robinson managed to get the force together in time to meet the force of the Italian invasion[47]. The invasion began on October 3 of 1935, with à force comprised of 19 planes and 50 pilots to man them. Though ultimately Ethiopian forces were outmatched by the Italian airforce, which was fully prepared and has the numbers to beat them, the invasion did have a large affect on the conflict with Ethiopia, and on May 9, 1936, Italy annexed Ethiopia. Bombing in Ethiopia continued, and Robinson took to the press to discuss this thoughts on the situation: “I myself tumbled from bed when I heard the bombs and ran to where my plane was hidden. I remained there the rest of the day and night. Apparently few soldiers were victims. The killed and wounded were chiefly in the neighborhood of the hospital. I was unable to see the effects of the second bombing attack [at 10 o'clock] because I was busy finding a safer hiding place for my plane. But I saw two planes, roaring terrifically, circling the city.”. After this conflict, Robinson soon returned to the U.S. in 1936, where he saw great commotion at his return.

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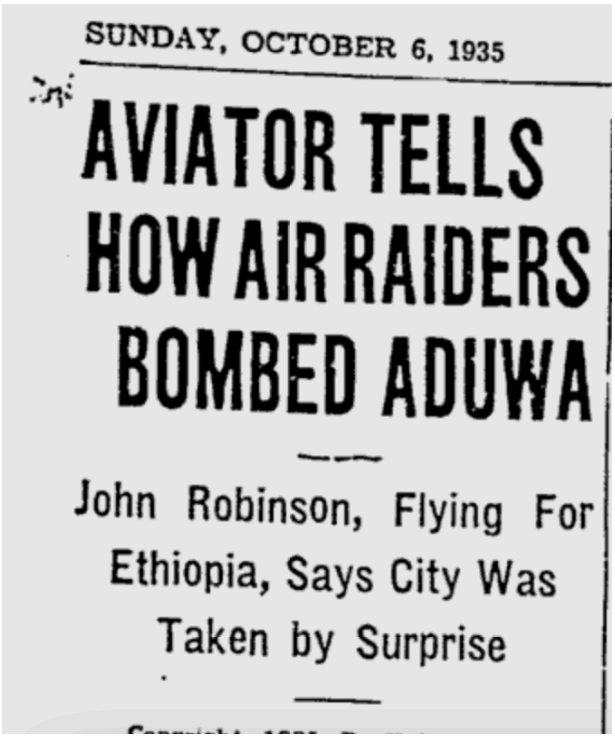
45 Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).

46 Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).

47 Phillip Thomas Tucker, *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1935

AVIATOR TELLS HOW AIR RAIDERS BOMBED ADUWA

John Robinson, Flying For Ethiopia, Says City Was Taken by Surprise

This commotion was nearly diametrically opposed to what he had experienced in Robinson returned to the United States "an authentic war hero" after initially leaving as an idealistic man looking for a way to serve in a country that wouldn't allow him. His plans to transform Tuskegee into a top-tier aviation academy were met with opposition, however, because they ran counter to the goals of the original program[48]. Despite the fact that Robinson and his Ethiopian comrades' campaign did not proceed as planned, he never stopped serving his country and devoting himself to aviation. After serving as an aircraft maintenance teacher during World War II, he returned to Ethiopia to continue his work with the Ethiopian Air Force and found a school to educate pilots there[49]. The first Ethiopian commercial airline was founded with his assistance in the final years of his life. Furthermore, John C. Robinson went away in 1954 from

[48] Phillip Thomas Tucker, Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).
[49] Phillip Thomas Tucker, Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).

injuries sustained in an aviation accident and was laid to rest in an Addis Abeba cemetery[50]. Although Robinson did not see his dream of black pilots being fully integrated into the U.S. armed forces realized in his lifetime, he was instrumental in their development. Despite being mostly forgotten and underappreciated, John C. Robinson's life and accomplishments serve as an inspiration to those who have the strength to persevere in the face of adversity and who helped pave the way for future generations of African-American pilots. However, he was not alone, and neither were men the only ones affected. Willa Brown, a pilot he met in 1934 and introduced to the Challenger Air Pilots Association, would eventually pave the way for other African-Americans to fly.

In a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt on December 6, 1941, pilot Willa Brown stated, "during the past three years I have devoted full time to aviation, and for the most part marked progress has been made." I have, however, experienced various difficulties—some of which I managed very effectively, while others were far too difficult for me to master."[51] The letter was an attempt to connect with the First Lady on subjects that she considered were in her interest, notably the fate of women, on the advent of World War II. She mentions Roosevelt's statement that "as Negro women, you have a part to play" in her letter. This letter, like her encounter with Chief Anderson, piqued Eleanor's interest in Brown's work, and she asked her to the White House to speak further about what she was doing. Brown was well established; having grown up in Kentucky, she was well acquainted to the Army College Report's concept that black people were not at all the types of people appropriate for duty, let alone aircraft[52]. Willa, on the other hand, was determined; she was educated, gifted, and a woman. She understood she had to carve her

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[50] Phillip Thomas Tucker, Father of the Tuskegee Airmen, John C. Robinson (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc, 2012).
[51] "Letter from Willa Beatrice Brown to Eleanor Roosevelt | DocsTeach," www.docsteach.org, n.d., https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/brown-roosevelt.
[52] Dorothy Cochrane and P. Ramirez, "Early African American Aviator Willa Brown," Si.edu, 2021, https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/early-african-american-aviator-willa-brown.

own path in aviation, so she enrolled as one of the first women at Curtiss Wright Aeronautical University in 1934[53]. Soon after finishing her studies, she obtained both her private and commercial pilot's licenses, making her the first black woman in the United States to do so[54]. So, when the time came to visit the White House, she was well prepared and motivated to make a difference, no matter how small, in the lives of black pilots and black servicemen and women in general. She eventually ended up flying the First Lady as well, which led to her later engaging with individuals in Washington to further integrate wartime duty[55].

[53] Dorothy Cochrane and P. Ramirez, “Early African American Aviator Willa Brown,”
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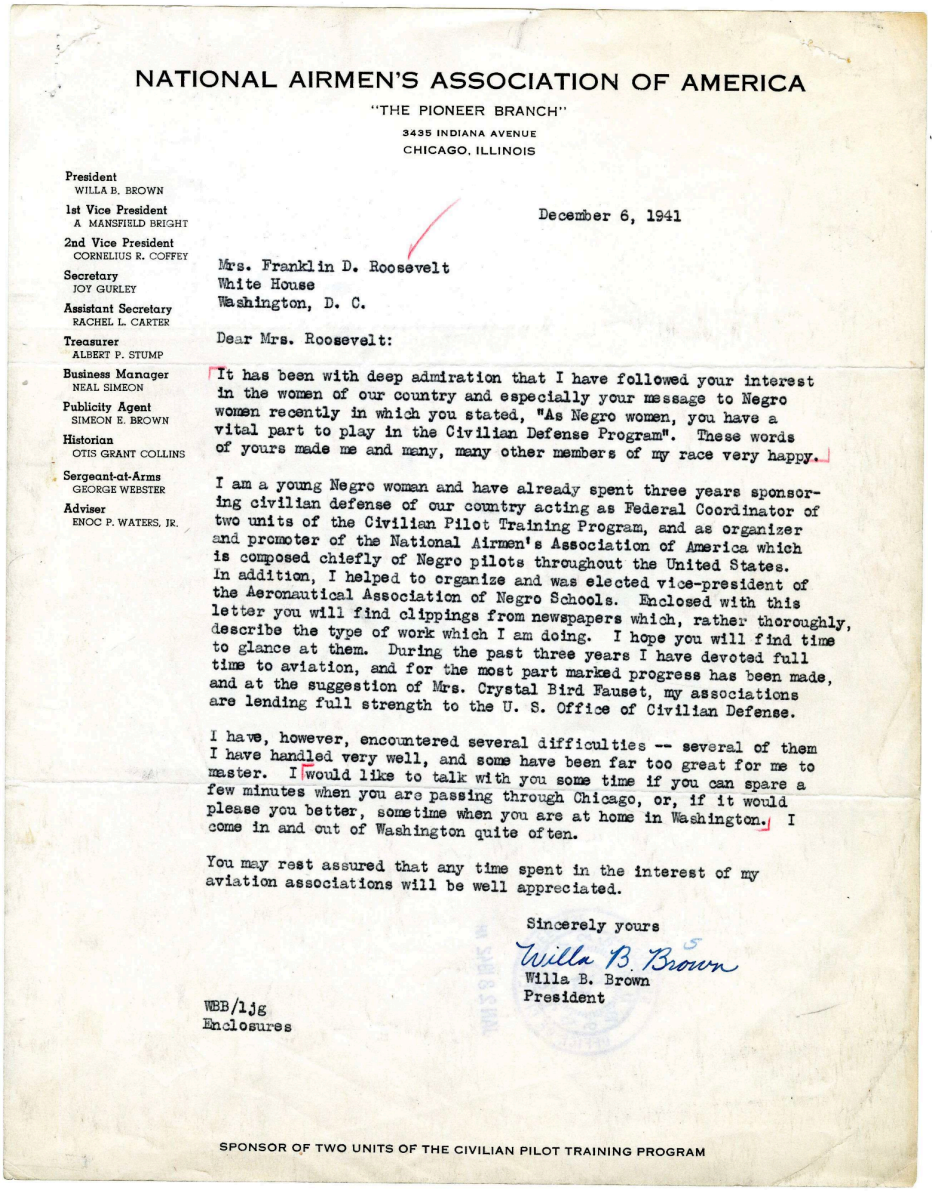

NATIONAL AIRMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

"THE PIONEER BRANCH"

3435 INDIANA AVENUE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

President
WILLA B. BROWN
1st Vice President
A MANSFIELD BRIGHT
2nd Vice President
CORNELIUS R. COFFEY
Secretary
JOY GURLEY
Assistant Secretary
RACHEL L. CARTER
Treasurer
ALBERT P. STUMP
Business Manager
NEAL SIMEON
Publicity Agent
SIMEON E. BROWN
Historian
OTIS GRANT COLLINS
Sergeant-at-Arms
GEORGE WEBSTER
Adviser
ENOC P. WATERS, JR.

December 6, 1941

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt
White House
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

It has been with deep admiration that I have followed your interest in the women of our country and especially your message to Negro women recently in which you stated, "As Negro women, you have a vital part to play in the Civilian Defense Program". These words of yours made me and many, many other members of my race very happy.

I am a young Negro woman and have already spent three years sponsoring civilian defense of our country acting as Federal Coordinator of two units of the Civilian Pilot Training Program, and as organizer and promoter of the National Airmen's Association of America which is composed chiefly of Negro pilots throughout the United States. In addition, I helped to organize and was elected vice-president of the Aeronautical Association of Negro Schools. Enclosed with this letter you will find clippings from newspapers which, rather thoroughly, describe the type of work which I am doing. I hope you will find time to glance at them. During the past three years I have devoted full time to aviation, and for the most part marked progress has been made, and at the suggestion of Mrs. Crystal Bird Fauset, my associations are lending full strength to the U. S. Office of Civilian Defense.

I have, however, encountered several difficulties -- several of them I have handled very well, and some have been far too great for me to master. I would like to talk with you some time if you can spare a few minutes when you are passing through Chicago, or, if it would please you better, sometime when you are at home in Washington. I come in and out of Washington quite often.

You may rest assured that any time spent in the interest of my aviation associations will be well appreciated.

Sincerely yours

Willa B. Brown

Willa B. Brown
President

WBB/ljg
Enclosures

SPONSOR OF TWO UNITS OF THE CIVILIAN PILOT TRAINING PROGRAM

Willa Brown's letter to Eleanor Roosevelt

Willa was very concerned with refuting the War Department's fall report, and she believed that the best way to do so was to make room for black aviators in the military[56]. But this was still America, just a few years after John C. Robinson's efforts to serve, which proved unfruitful enough that he left the country entirely to serve another country. When World War II

[56] Dorothy Cochrane and P. Ramirez, "Early African American Aviator Willa Brown,"

broke out, Willa applied to join the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP, but was turned down due to her race. However, even though racism was still prevalent throughout the United States during the war, as the battle for civil rights became increasingly important, black individuals felt called to serve in the war. Brown, along with her husband Cornelius Coffey of the Coffey School of Aeronautics, helped shape Civil Air Patrol Squadron 613, which flew anti-submarine machines, border patrols, and courier services to protect the home front[57]. Brown stayed with the Coffey School after it was chosen as one of several black schools and universities to offer the Civilian Pilot Training Program by the Civil Aeronautics Program[58]. Because of the effectiveness of the program, the Coffey School became a feeder school for the newly established War Training Service Program, which ultimately sent pupils to additional training at the Tuskegee Army Air Field[59]. According to data conducted by the National World War II Museum, Willa Brown was personally responsible for educating over 200 future Tuskegee Airmen and instructors[60]. The significance of her legacy cannot be overstated - not only as a beacon for black women aviators, but also as a member of a community of black pilots who were deeply invested in both combating myths about black people's inability to fly and paving the way for the next generation of pilots to come after them, pilots who, for Willa Brown, would become some of the most decorated World War II veterans in history.

Prior to the establishment of the Tuskegee Program, no African-American man served as a military aviator for the United States[61]. Of course, there were exceptions to this rule, such as the case of Eugene Jacques Bullard, a black aviator born to formerly enslaved parents who was not permitted to serve in an American unit during World War I and therefore flew to France to

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[57] Dorothy Cochrane and P. Ramirez, “Early African American Aviator Willa Brown,”
[58] Dorothy Cochrane and P. Ramirez, “Early African American Aviator Willa Brown,”
[59] Dorothy Cochrane and P. Ramirez, “Early African American Aviator Willa Brown,”
[60] Dorothy Cochrane and P. Ramirez, “Early African American Aviator Willa Brown,”
[61] Charles W Dryden and Benjamin O, *A-Train : Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University Of Alabama Press, 2002).

join their military air service[62]. Advocates such as John C. Robinson and Willa Brown, who were personally and politically invested in the issue, fought vehemently on behalf of black pilots against the racial discrimination that prevented them from flying for the military, which stemmed from the previously mentioned 1925 Army College Report. In 1940, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, at his wife's urging, directed the U.S. Air Corps to establish an all-black flying unit, after allocating funds to more civilian flight colleges willing to instruct black Americans[63]. As a result of the army's adamant opposition to integration, the pilot program did not proceed smoothly. Central Alabama turned out to be a terrible place to train black military pilots - white civilians in the areas were notably hostile and aggressive towards the black pilots, and life for the pilots outside of their work in the program was terrible, as was the case in Seymour, Indiana, where the 447th bombardment group was transferred and met with widespread racism and discrimination from not only the locals, but also their fellow white servicemen[64]. The black officers frequently requested access to the only officer's club on base, but were denied access[65]. In an instance of extreme measures, Lieutenant Milton Henry was court-martialed for entering the club "illegally."[66] And not only pilots were affected by this issue. The officers in charge of the recruits were also unsuitable, such as Colonel Frederick V.H. Kimble, who was not as invested as an instructor may have needed to be and was at times antagonistic towards the success that the pilots were able to achieve in the program that he was unable to[67]. In addition, many white flight instructors refused to interact with black pilots[68]. There was only one colonel, who was not to be

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[62] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation* (Boston Mass.: Branden Books, 2008).
[63] Walt Napier, "A Short History of Integration in the US Armed Forces," www.af.mil, July 1, 2021, https://www.af.mil/News/Commentaries/Display/Article/2676311/a-short-history-of-integration-in-the-us-armed-forces/.
[64]Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[65] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[66] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[67] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[68] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*

replaced or have anyone reach his rank because he survived his combat missions, and very few of those who would become the Tuskegee Airmen rose above the rank of lieutenant by the end of the war, despite the fact that many of them flew more than three times the number of combat missions required of fighter pilots prior to leaving the combat zone[69].

Despite this, they became one of the most decorated units of pilots in the history of the military[70]. This was partially the result of C. Afred "Chief" Anderson's training, which was notoriously rigorous and uncompromising[71]. This proved to be something of a trial by fire for many of the pilots, as the level of prejudice and discrimination they encountered in the field was not all that different from what they encountered at home. His techniques produced immediate results, and he was appointed primary instructor for aviation cadets in the 99th Pursuit Squadron, the first all-black fighter squadron in the United States[72]. The 99th joined the other black squadrons to establish the 332nd fighter group, also known as the Red Tails[73]. 450 combat-experienced airmen flew 1,378 combat missions, destroyed 260 hostile aircraft, and earned more than 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses. They were beyond fit for combat; they were successful and decorated[74].

The Tuskegee Airmen as they exist in American memory is irreparably connected to how we remember World War II[75]. The myth surrounding World War II as a beacon of American excellence, also known as the “Good War Myth”, concerns the ideas of how we remember the war - it is critical to the idea of what America as a whole is to remember the war as a peak of victoriousness, where every citizen was at their best, and the brave men fighting the war made it

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[69] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[70] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[71] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[72] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[73] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[74] Charles E Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen : The Men Who Changed a Nation*
[75] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, “We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen,” Journal of Social Issues 71, no. 2 (June 2015): 264–78, https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12109.

possibly for citizens at home to prosper after[76]. There is truth to some of this, when you consider the valor of those who chose to serve and how that contributed to the war itself. But this issue of the Good War and the mythology behind that becomes especially complex when you consider the Tuskegee Experiment; the pilot program emerged because of the active work done by black activists and fellow pilots who saught to create space for black pilots in the Armed Forces, by any means neccessary, and yet they were still fighting for this space within a segregated army, that didn't desegregate until well after the war, in 1948, when President Truman issued Executive Order No. 9981, that brought an end to racial segregation and unequal treatment policies in the U.S. military[77]. And this still came before integration outside of the military sector, and on the eve of the rise of Jim Crow, when mass lynchings and other racially targeted violence created an America that was at war with itsself[78]. It goes against what would be a vision of communal spirit and American brotherhood to consider how members of the Tuskegee program were being thrown out of bars, had their belongings stolen, were harrassed, and at times even beaten, by racist citizens of the towns they were inhabiting[79]. And yet much of that is left out of the collective history of the Tuskegee Airmen. When many citizens think about the Tuskegee Airmen, much of what comes to mind is how they are portrayed in the media - Tuskegee is constantly referenced by all of their accomplishments and service in conjunction with the American war effort at large, and yet this was very far from the reality of what the pilots themselves experiences[80]. Like many of the stories portrayed about America in American media,

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[76] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, "We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen," *Journal of Social Issues* 71, no. 2 (June 2015): 264–78, https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12109.
[77] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, "We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen,"
[78] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, "We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen,"
[79] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, "We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen,"
[80] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, "We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen,"

adaptations about the Tuskegee Airmen often reflect the ideals of what the sociopolitical climate was at the time. Taking for instance the 1995 HBO made for tv film *The Tuskegee Airmen*. Made in the 90s, starring black and white actors who were acclaimed during that period including Laurence Fishbourne, Cuba Gooding Jr. and John Lithgow, the film portrays the story of the airmen while, outside of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Jr., no actual Tuskegee airmen were portrayed in the film. The film is solidly good, and though a period piece, distinctly a relic of its time. It is like other war movies in that they face setbacks, recover, and our made into stronger soldiers beacuse of that. It is worth mentioning also that the film ends during the war - the Tuskegee Airmen are invited, by a white soldier that rebuffed them previously, to provide their escort services for a raid on Berlin. It seems especially significant that the last images in the film are ones that root the Airmen in the conflict of which they are the stars of. It's as if they are forever rooted at the state they are when they are in flight school, forever waiting to be deployed. This decision is an unfortunate one in that it does not display the lives of the airmen after their conflict. As was mentioned, many films reflect the general conversation around their subjects at the time they are made; what does a film, that displays its veterans in a perpetual stasis of war service, say about the importance of their legacy in modern culture? What does it say about how we care about these veterans as people, and not just tools to the advancement of the nation?

The airmen did leave war service with multiple accolades and went on to live extremely fulfilled lives - in 2007, all of the airmen where collectively rewarded a Congressional Gold Medal, and the site where they where trained has now been named the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site[81]. Robert W. Williams Jr., a bombardier in the 477th Bombardment Group, went on to be a judge in the First Judicial District in Pennsylvania, and he later became the first

[81] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, "We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen,"

African American to successfully become a city-wide candidate for District Attourney[82]. Another airmen by the name of Coleman Young, who served in the 477th Medium-Bomber Group, went on to become the first African-American mayor of Detroit.[83] It seems especially resonant that these black pilots, who were pioneers in every sense of the word, continued to pioneer and raise the bar. They are, in their own way, breaking the myth that their lives stopped after their service in the war, and their legacies continue to impact young black pilots and and black pioneers in every field. In an especially touching tribute to their legacy, 15 year old Kimberly Anyadike, after becoming the younger female African-American pilot to complete a transcontinental flight across the United States, cited the Tuskegee Airmen as her biggest inspiration, and was accompanied on her trip by Levi Thornhill, a former Tuskegee Airmen[84]. Their legacy is the ultimate offering to the American republic; that after all the experienced, inside and outside of the conflict of the war, they continued to serve and give back to this country, is a testament to their own fortitude.

On the eve of his deployment to World War II, a Tuskegee Flight Institute student pilot is quoted as saying, "If I can get up there, I'll help change things down here."[85] All of the pioneers in black aviation history shared the belief that reaching for the clouds would grant them more independence than they would have otherwise enjoyed on the ground. Perhaps that's true; the right to control one's own body has always played a significant role in the development of

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[82] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, “We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen,”
[83] Andrea G. Hunter and Alethea Rollins, “We Made History: Collective Memory and the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen,”
[84] Tracy Miller, “Kimberly Anyadike, 15, Becomes Youngest African American Female to Pilot Plane Cross-Country – New York Daily News,” www.nydailynews.com, accessed April 27, 2023, https://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/15-yr-old-youngest-black-pilot-fly-cross-country-article-1.399825?barcprox=true.
[85] “Chicago and the Tuskegee Airmen,” chicagotribune.com, n.d., https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/editorials/ct-tuskegee-airmen-chicago-world-war-ii-willa-brown-edit-0119-jm-20150119-story.html.

individual liberty in the United States. Those whose liberties have been severely disputed can relate deeply to the idea of being free to move, travel, and take up and grow into space. This concept is central to many people's conception of what it means to be an American, just as it was central to John Robinson's search for freedom in Ethiopia, Willa Brown's advocacy on Capitol Hill, and the Tuskegee Airmen's heroic efforts. This is why listening to and honoring their narratives is crucial. Historians, in this sense, are like to superheroes, wielding their ability to place emphasis on what they think worthy of attention or of deeper knowledge, as history is made up of memories, of stories that defy explanation, of blunders that empires or communities desire to forget. Things are the way they are for every citizen of the planet because planet War II altered the political and personal landscape of the United States permanently. These tales—of a boy in Florida who saw a white aviator in the sky and fantasized that he was him, of a young woman of extraordinary intelligence and resolve who wrote to the First Lady and flew her on her plane, of the bravery of a group of pilots who were allowed to fly with their fellow soldiers but not to eat in diners with them—these are the stories that have inspired generations. Despite everything that has happened to them, these people not only maintain their feeling of independence and self-fulfillment, but they also maintain an almost unbelievable faith in the potential of the American dream. In the words of former Tuskegee Airmen William H. Holloman, "America's not perfect. But I'll hold her hand until she gets well."[86]

[86] *Double Victory: The Tuskegee Airmen at War* (Lucasfilm, 2012).

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