Hofstra’s Own Tuskegee Airman

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Introduction

Although the Tuskegee Experiment was instituted by the Air Force and the pilots trained at an air force base, the officers and the men they graduated were not always viewed as equal to other pilots, or other men. That is because they were black. Until President Truman signed Executive Order #9981 on July 26, 1948 the armed forces were segregated.
This is the story of one Tuskegee airman, Lt. Col. Charles Dryden.

• Who were the Tuskegee airmen?
• Who was Charles Dryden and what is his relationship to Hofstra University?
Charles W. Dryden

Charles Dryden was born in New York on Sept. 16, 1920. His parents, “Rob” and Violet had been teachers in Jamaica. During World War I “Rob” was a sergeant in the Jamaican Expeditionary Force. Charles Dryden’s hobby from childhood was building model airplanes.
Spring 1941

In the beginning, there were six black cadets enrolled in the Air Corps Technical Training School. They were to be trained in three technical specialties and then assigned to the 99th Pursuit Squadron which was to begin classes in June of 1941. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, five cadets were transferred to the Tuskegee Army Air Field.
Where is Tuskegee?

Located near Tuskegee, Alabama, the Tuskegee Institute along with several other institutions had been selected in 1941 to offer a Civilian Pilot Training Program to black college students. This “experimental” program would eventually see 992 black military aviators become part of history.

This is the air field, in photo, from 8,000 feet.
The First Lady goes for a ride:

When Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Tuskegee Institute on April 19, 1941, many people (including herself) were not convinced that black pilots could fly airplanes. After taking a ride with “Chief” Anderson, however, the Institute was chosen as the site for the first Black Air Corps pilots to be trained and eventually to be sent to participate in World War II.
Special Orders:

Charles Dryden wanted to fly airplanes since he was a child. With his assignment to Tuskegee Institute in hand, he could make that dream a reality.
Ready to Fly!

This photo of Charles Dryden was taken on April 29, 1942. As a brand new 2nd Lieutenant he was part of the second class to finish Aviation Cadet training. The classes were given numerical and alpha designations determined by year of completion and order of graduation, his class was designated the 42-D class.
In 1943, The Journal and Guide, ran a story about “the best negro combat pilots.” Charles Dryden was named to the list which included 8 other pilots. Here he is pictured with his plane, nicknamed “A - Train.” Dryden states in his book, that he suggested the name because of the Duke Ellington song. As a New Yorker, the name also conjures images of the 8th Ave. subway express!
The Class of 42-D, Clarence C. Jamison, Dryden, and Sidney P. Brooks, all 2nd Lieutenants.
The original pilots of the 99th Pursuit Squadron

This photo was taken at the Tuskegee Army Air Field, March 1943.
The Curtiss Warhawks, known as the P-40 F, were flown by the 99th Pursuit squadron as fighter-bombers under the command of Lt. Col. Benjamin O. Davis.
Involvement in World War:

After intensive training the black pilots wondered when they would be needed overseas. Lt. Dryden was shipped to North Africa in April of 1943. There the pilots of the Tuskegee “experiment” waited to see what their contribution would be.
June 9, 1943

An historic day, as six American P-40’s engage in hostilities over Pantelleria, Sicily. All six of the planes were from the 99th Pursuit Squadron. Charles Dryden was the first pilot to engage in the conflict and it is the first time in our history that black aviators had been involved in aerial combat.

Only two of our planes sustained any damage.
Aftermath:

After performing 200 escort missions, during which not one bomb was lost to enemy aircraft, the men of the 99th were sent to different locales. Dryden and several others ended up in Selfridge Field in Michigan. The morale of the black officers was at an all-time low.
During his stay at Selfridge, Dryden was an officer. However, black officers were not given equal access to the Officers Club. After being denied access, different groups of black officers staged a continuous defiance of their commanding officer by asking to be given permission to enter the club. Since a war was still being waged, such disobedience could have been interpreted as treason, which was punishable by death. After five days, the commanding officers’ response? Close the Officers Club.
The Ultimate Insult: Walterboro, South Carolina

The injustices aimed at the black aviators, officers, and enlisted men continued from 1944-1948. Movie theaters, dining facilities, barracks, and other areas were off-limits, or segregated. The ultimate insult occurred when German Prisoners of War, noticeable by the white letters “PW” on the back of their fatigues were given access to the “white” side of the cafeteria, while black aviators and officers could not enter.
Charles Dryden continued his military career with stays in Kentucky, Ohio, and California, then trained at Communications Officers School in Indiana. After graduation in 1950, he was assigned to Japan. At first considered a “cushy” assignment, the invasion of South Korea and attack on American troops stationed there, led to the start of war. Captain Dryden was once again assigned to fly, this time an AT-6.
Dryden had begun his college education at City College. Under a program called “Operation Bootstrap,” Dryden, although still in the military, was assigned to Mitchel Field in Hempstead, NY. He was able to take the required college courses to complete his B.A. degree in Political Science. He graduated from Hofstra in 1955.
Major Charles Dryden is suited up to fly a T-33 Jet trainer at Mitchel Air Force Base, NY. This photo was taken in 1956, one year after receiving his Hofstra diploma. Mitchel AFB was located where Hofstra’s North Campus now stands.
Lt. Col. Charles Dryden continued to achieve during his military career. He received an MA from Columbia University in 1957, went overseas to serve under Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis in Germany from 1957-59, and was a Professor at Howard University from 1959-61 teaching Air Science.
In 1963 Dryden ran for Committeeman in Matawan Township in New Jersey. He served with Jay Krivitzky until 1965. Photo of campaign truck, at right.
“Chief” Charles Anderson, the pilot who had taken First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt on that historic flight, and Lt.Col. Charles Dryden in 1993 at Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama.
Lt. Col. Charles Dryden Received an Honorary Degree from Hofstra University in December of 1996.
Lt. Col. Dryden in 1997, with model of his World War II P-40 airplane, the “A-Train.”
To read more about Lt. Col. Charles Dryden:
Hofstra’s University Archives maintains Lt. Col. Dryden’s papers. The collection can be used in our reading room. The Department is located in the Joan & Donald E. Axinn Library, Room 032. Please contact us at: (516) 463-6407 for an appointment or additional information.