

**AFRICAN AMERICAN WARRANT OFFICER  
AVIATORS: THE EARLY PIONEERS**



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African American Warrant Officer Aviators:  
The Early Pioneers  
By CW4 Farrell J. Chiles

On February 21, 1951, the United States Army announced in a letter issued by the Adjutant General, Washington, DC, that Transportation Helicopter Companies were being organized at Fort Sill, Oklahoma to provide short haul transport to expedite tactical operations and logistical support in the forward areas of combat zones. Warrant officers and enlisted men in any grade who volunteered for training as Army helicopter aviators and who met the prescribed requirements were eligible for selection.

After the Korean War, the Army Aviation School moved from Fort Sill, OK to Camp Rucker, AL in the latter part of 1954. Camp Rucker was re-designated Fort Rucker effective October 13, 1955. The first helicopter class at Fort Rucker began training with 6 commissioned officers, 2 warrant officers, and 17 warrant officer candidates (WOC) and graduated on April 30, 1955.

**George T. Johnson** was a Sergeant First Class who served in Korea from 1952-1955. In January 1956, as a Public Information NCO, he reenlisted in the Army. While assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas, one day he read an article in the post newspaper that the Army was building its helicopter fleet. He applied for the Army Warrant Officer Helicopter flight training and was accepted.

Johnson arrived at Fort Rucker in September 1956. He attended four weeks of pre-flight training. In his class 57-4 was one other African American by the name of Jasper. One day while sitting in the Operations Ready Room, and Jasper was out flying, Johnson overheard the Chief Civilian Training Pilot by the name of Keller say, "Got to get rid of one of these colored guys". According to Johnson, "We hadn't soloed yet. Jasper couldn't do anything right. They booted him out". Johnson was the first to solo in his class. He was the eighteenth black to graduate from the Warrant Officer Aviation Course. Jim Delaney was the first from Fort Sill to graduate. Fred Farmer was #3. Joe Holland and John Banks were the first Fort Wolters black graduates.

Upon graduation, Johnson was assigned to Fort Hood, Texas where he was the only black in his unit, the 64<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company. He spent two years at Fort Knox, Kentucky and then in March 1960, he was transferred to Germany to support the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps where he flew high level officials. There were four African Americans in his unit in Germany. In April 1960, Johnson and fellow African American Warrant Officer Cornelius Daniels were crew members that flew the President and his staff to Paris. They also were part of the crew staff of Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

Johnson served in Korea and Japan from 1962 – 1965. In response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident (August 1964), Johnson was sent to Vietnam and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, becoming the first African American in the Vietnam War to receive the honor. Reports of the award appeared in Jet and Ebony magazines.

Johnson made Chief Warrant Officer Three in March 1965. He retired from the Army in November 1967.

### **Carl Burhanan**

Carl Burhanan was in Class 55-F. During his distinguished career, he served in Korea and Vietnam. He also has the distinction of being the first, and thus far, the only African American commander (of either service) to fly a United States president. Burhanan flew Presidents Johnson, Nixon, and Ford. Burhanan was in the left seat on President Nixon's last official flight. He retired as a CW4 after 26 years of military service. Burhanan joined Oasis Aviation, Inc. in 1978 and was promoted to President in 1987. He has served on the National Petroleum Council and on the Board of Directors of Victory Energy Corporation. Mr. Burhanan is a founding member of the United States Army Black Aviators Association.

### **Fred Farmer**

Fred Farmer served in the all black 555<sup>th</sup> Parachute Battalion (the "Triple Nickel") from 1946 to 1947 and the 505<sup>th</sup> Airborne from 1948-1953. Later, he served two tours of flying combat in Vietnam. CW2 Farmer was assigned to the 147<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company (Hillclimbers). The unit was activated on June 20, 1965, as one of the first CH-47 Chinook units in Army Aviation. The Hillclimbers deployed to Southeast Asia on November 8, 1965. On December 1, 1965, the 147<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company had the honor to have the first CH-47 to fly in Vietnam at Vang Tau AAF. They were assigned to the 11<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Aviation Group, and U.S. Army Vietnam. On April 21, 1966, CW2 Farmer with another warrant officer did the first night extraction in Vietnam by a CH-47 for four seriously wounded personnel using the winch. Farmer's awards include the Master Parachutist and Glider Badges, Air Medal with 17 Oak Leaf Cluster, two Army Commendation Medals, and the Vietnamese Cross for Gallantry. He retired as a CW3 in 1967. Farmer retired from the U.S. Civil Service after 29 years. He currently resides in Fayetteville, NC.

### **Frank L. Eastland**

CW4 (Ret.) Frank L. Eastland was assigned to the 175<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) (Outlaws) in August 1969 as pilot in the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon. He made AC in December 1969 as Emu 20 (call sign). Eastland was transferred to sister Company 175<sup>th</sup> at Vinh Long in March 1970. After 30 days he became AC (Aircraft Commander) again in Outlaw 20 and spent the rest of his Vietnam tour as Senior Advisor pilot for the 9<sup>th</sup> AVA Division. Eastland came off active duty in 1971 and became a member of the Alabama National Guard as an aviator for almost 30 years, retiring in October 2000. While a member of the National Guard, he was employed with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as a pilot and retired from the TVA in 1993. He later became a Chief Helicopter Pilot for Alphajet International.

## **Ezell Ware, Jr.**

CW2 Ezell Ware, Jr. was born in Mobile, Alabama and raised in Magee, Mississippi and McAlester, Oklahoma. He initially joined the Marines as a private, but later joined the Army and by 1967 and advanced to the rank of Chief warrant officer (W-2) before accepting a direct commission to First Lieutenant in 1969.

On September 9, 1968, the 40<sup>th</sup> ARVN Regiment was battling an enemy force of unknown size near Bong Son. The ARVN unit was hampered during a battle by approaching darkness. Then CW2 Ware's unit, the 61<sup>st</sup> Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) in Binh Dinh Province, South Vietnam, was called in. A combination of the 61<sup>st</sup>, heavy artillery, and the United States Air Force blasted away at the enemy. After five NVA had been killed, a wounded NVA threw his hands in the air and surrendered. CW2 Ware's gunship guided the enemy to the nearest friendly troops. Chief Warrant Ezell Ware and First Lieutenant Robert McElhose were credited with obtaining the 61<sup>st</sup> AHC's first detainee while still in the air.

Ware later joined the California Army National Guard and rose to the rank of Brigadier General (CA) and Chief Assistant Adjutant of the California National Guard. He retired from the military in 2003 after 42 years of service.

## **Fallen Comrades**

**WO1 Donald Harrison** was killed in Action from an incident on December 2, 1966, while performing duty as a pilot. His age at death was 21 years old. He was born on June 9, 1945, in New York, NY. Harrison was a graduate of Class 66-13 with a Military Occupational Specialty of 062B (Helicopter Pilot, Utility and Light Cargo Single Rotor). He started his Vietnam tour on October 7, 1966 and was assigned to the 281<sup>st</sup> AHC, 17<sup>th</sup> Combat Aviation Group (CAG) under the 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade. His helicopter was hit by ground fire and crashed while attempting to extract a Special Forces recon team in Laos.

**WO1 Sylvester Davis** was killed from a hostile fire incident on January 23, 1969 while performing duty as a helicopter pilot with the 283<sup>rd</sup> Medical Detachment in Pleiku Province, South Vietnam. Davis was born on May 30, 1940 in Akron, Ohio and was 28 years old. He graduated in Flight Class 68-7 with a Military Occupational Specialty of 062B (Helicopter Pilot, Utility and Light Cargo Single Rotor). Davis started his Vietnam tour on August 23, 1968 and his total military service was eight years.

## **United States Army Black Aviators Association (USABBA)**

CW3 (Retired) George T. Johnson realized that significant historical deeds done by African American Aviators were being ignored. He strongly believed that these deeds could be reclaimed and tracked for prosperity. In 1982, Johnson contacted several of his long time friends (both current and retired Army Aviators) about his vision.

On June 22-26, 1983, the first reunion of United States Army Black Aviation Association was held in Wichita, Kansas. The meeting was attended by both officer and warrant officer aviators. Then Brigadier Colin Powell was stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and scheduled to speak at the first reunion, but was promoted and transferred to the Pentagon prior to the reunion.

Among the attendees at the first reunion were CW4 (Ret.) Robert B. Akers, CW2 Prince Alexander, CW4 (Ret.) Carl Burhanan, CW3 (Ret.) Cornelius Daniel, CW3 (Ret.) Joseph P. Holland, CW4 (Ret.) Ulyses Lamkin, CW3 (Ret.) George T. Johnson, CW4 (Ret.) Clarence T. Jones, CW3 (Ret.) George W. Murray, Jr., and CW3 (Ret.) Marion W. Sligh. During the meeting provisional officers were elected for a one year term: President – COL (Ret.) Harry W. Townsend; Vice President – LTC (Ret.) J.B. (Jerry) Hawkins; Secretary – LTC (Ret.) Waddell Avery; and Treasurer – CW3 (Ret.) George T. Johnson.

### **Mission**

The United States Army Black Aviation Association (USABBA), Inc., is dedicated to making sure that the latest aviation information is made available to the membership and interested young people. USABBA encourages good communication between Aviators and other aviation specialties of the Active Army, Army Reserve, Army National Guards and Retired Communities. In addition, USABBA encourages two-way communications and support with other aviation organizations throughout the country.

### **Goals and Objectives**

USABBA was conceived to:

- Promote, support and encourage minorities to pursue educational and professional goals in the field of aviation.
- Develop scholarships and student aid programs that are sufficiently varied to provide youth the opportunity to become aviators, engineers, navigators, technicians, or other aviation specialties.
- Enroll as many members as possible to increase the support base of the organization and provide funds for the achievement of the organization's goals.

Additionally, USABBA's officers and selected members continue a concerted effort to:

- Identify the contributions black Americans have made to military and civilian aviation in this country.
- Encourage young people to enter the military and commercial fields of aviation and to pursue and complete educational objectives in related fields.
- Stimulate and encourage broad employment opportunities for Blacks and other minorities in all aviation fields.

### **Army Aviation Association of America (AAAA)**

The Army Aviation Association of America (AAAA) was formed in early 1957 by a small group of senior aviation officers in the active Army, the Reserve Forces of the United States Army, and Industry.

An AAAA-sponsored Army Aviation Hall of Fame honors those persons who have made a) an outstanding contribution to Army Aviation over an extended period, b) a doctrinal or technical contribution, c) an innovation with an identifiable impact on Army Aviation, d) efforts that were an inspiration to others, or e) any combination of the foregoing, and records the excellence of their achievements for posterity.

Warrant Officer Aviators inducted into AAAA Hall of Fame include CW4 (Ret.) William T. Hargrove and CW4 (Ret.) Cleveland Valrey.

**CW4 William T. Hargrove** – Army Aviation Hall of Fame 1998 Induction (citation)

CW4 William T. Hargrove has “done it all” throughout a 30-year military career. An enlisted soldier in 1951, combat engineer in Korea 1952-1953, NCO Warrant Officer Candidate and then a graduate of “Camp” Rucker’s 12<sup>th</sup> WOC class (55-Q) in November 1955.

He was an early YH-40 (Huey) test pilot, rotary-wing instructor, civilian college graduate, aircraft maintenance officer, Presidential support pilot, Vietnam combat aviator, VIP pilot and finally retiring in 1981 as an officer/NOC club manager.

After winning his Army Aviator wings and Warrant Officer bars, William was trained in the CH-34 helicopter and soon assigned to Fort Rucker’s Aircraft Test Activity (TATSA) and flew flight tests on many evolving Army aircraft, including the “Huey” series (YH-40, HU-1A, HU-1B, HU-1D).

Following Warrant Officer fixed-wing qualification in 1960, CW4 Hargrove was stationed in Europe (SETAF) where he attended the Italian Army aircraft ski-school and was awarded the Italian Army Aviation Badge and became a helicopter mountain flying instructor pilot for Italian Army Aviators. Trained in helicopter instrument flying, William established an instrument training program for other UH-1 qualified Army Aviators in SETAF.

During Presidential visits, CW4 Hargrove flew support for Mrs. Kennedy in Greece in 1961 and for President Kennedy’s 1963 Italy trip. In 1963, William flew numerous CH-34 mercy missions, high in the Italian Alps, following the Vajont Dam catastrophic landslide and water surge. The relief operation earned him the Air Medal, the Sikorsky “Winged-S” air rescue emblem and the Italian Government Bronze Medal.

Vietnam called CW4 Hargrove in 1965, where he flew Hueys and was a Field Maintenance Officer with the 151<sup>st</sup> Transportation Detachment. Returning to Fort Benning in 1966, he gained additional aircraft maintenance experience as a Detachment Command. Back in Vietnam in 1968, William flew as UH-1 Commander on all missions

by MG Robert R. Williams, Commanding General of the 1st Aviation Brigade. This honor was “accorded in testimony of his flying ability”. From 1969-1974, assigned again to Fort Benning, he was an aircraft maintenance Shop Platoon Leader, flew the stars during the filming of “The Green Berets”, and served on the Officer’s Club board of governors and his recommendations provided the best service for assigned and visiting aviators.

Upon retirement in 1981, CW4 William T. Hargrove, Sr., left Army Aviation a “legacy of duty”; Master Army Aviator, 7200 accident-free flying hours, 1200 combat flight hours, and 22 aircraft type qualifications. His 50 medals include the DFC, the Air Medal w/28 OLC’s and service ribbons and decorations from Korea, Italy, and Vietnam. Truly an Army Aviator for the Army Aviation Hall of Fame.

**CW4 Cleveland Valrey – Army Aviation Hall of Fame 2001 Induction (citation)**

CW4 Valrey’s career in aviation began at age 16 in the Army Air Forces. After three years he switched to the Army in 1949. He entered flight school as a master sergeant with 11 years of service, including combat in Korea with the all black 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Company. He was wounded, hospitalized in Japan and returned to duty in Korea. For service in the Korean War he received the Bronze Star Medal with Valor device, Army Commendation Medal, Purple Hear, Korean Service Medal with six Battle Stars and Arrowhead, and the Combat Infantry Badge.

After flight school he served in H-21, H-34 and H-37 companies in the U.S. and Germany. Following fixed-wing training in 1964 he was assigned to special forces, which included a stint in the Dominican Republic. He served two distinguished tours in Vietnam, totaling 32 months. He flew with the 228<sup>th</sup> of the 1<sup>st</sup> Calvary Division, the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group and the 205<sup>th</sup> Assault Support Helicopter Company. He was also selected to fly the CG, 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade, and the deputy CG of the U.S. Army, Vietnam. During his Vietnam service he was awarded four Distinguished Fling Crosses; two Bronze Star Medals; 50 Air Medals, one with Valor Device; four Army Commendation Medals; one with Valor Device; second award of the Combat Infantry Badge and the Vietnam Medal with nine Battle Stars.

His final assignment was in the Warrant Officer Branch, Office of Personnel Operations. For his post-Vietnam service he received three Meritorious Service Medals. He acquire more than 10,500 flight hours, including over 2,100 combat hours, and 4,200 as an instructor pilot and instrument examiner.

This truly outstanding master Army Aviator and soldier was a role model during more than 30 years of service.

**The United States Army Aviation Museum**

The United States Army Aviation Museum at Fort Rucker, Alabama maintains a collection of over 160 military aircraft, including one of the largest collections of military

helicopters in the world. Public galleries represent the Army's involvement in aviation from the beginning days of the Wright brothers and early combat aircraft from World War I, to the highly technological machines flown by Army Aviators today.

On the museum's website, aviators are profiled. Among warrant officer aviators profiled are CW4 (Ret.) Clarence T. Jones (deceased) and CW4 (Ret.) Carl Burhanan.

**CW4 (Ret.) Clarence T. Jones**

Name: Clarence T. Jones  
Nickname: Charlie Tango  
Rank: Chief Warrant Officer Four  
Branch: TC/AV  
Status: Retired  
Service: 26 years  
DOB: 22 January 1930  
Hours Flown: 6000  
Combat Hours: 1000  
Flight Class: 57-9  
School: University of Puget Sound  
Military School: Senior Warrant Officer Course; United States Army Aviation Safety  
Aviation Designation: Master Army Aviator  
Aircraft: CH-21, CH-34, OH-13, OH23, OH-58, U-6 Beaver, U-21, UH-1 Series  
Combat Experience: Korean Campaign; Vietnam (2 tours)  
Decorations: Bronze Star (9); Air Medal (9); UN Medal; Korean Medal; Meritorious Service Medal; Army Commendation Medal  
Significant Achievements: Survived combat tours in Vietnam and Korea; Honorary member of the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group; As a NCO, he was a key person to modify the M4 Aluminum Pontoon Bridge to the M4T6 Floating Bridge.

**CW4 (Ret.) Carl Burhanan**

Name: Carl Burhanan  
Rank: Chief Warrant Officer Four  
Branch: Army  
Status: Retired  
Service: 26 years  
DOB: 17 February 1934  
Hours Flown: 9024  
Combat Hours: 332  
Flight Class: 55-F  
School: BS. Aviation Administration  
Military School: Flight School  
Aviation Designation: Pilot/Flight Standards  
Aircraft: CH-19, CH-25, CH-34, CH-47, CH-54, VH-1N, VH-3  
Combat Experience: Korea; Vietnam

Decorations: Presidential Service Badge, Master Army Aviation Badge, Meritorious Service Medal, Bronze Star, Air Medal (8)

Significant Achievements: Infantry First Sergeant at age 19; First African American to become a Presidential Aircraft Commander

### **Black Aviation Hall of Fame**

#### **George T. Johnson**

CW3 (Ret.) George T. Johnson was born in Kansas City, Missouri and joined the Army at the age of seventeen. During his distinguished career in the Army, Johnson was among the first and limited number of Black men to graduate from the United States Army Aviation School at Fort Rucker, Alabama and the U.S. Army Transportation School at Fort Eustis, Virginia.

Mr. Johnson served as a member of the I Corps Aviation and flew over 280 missions; He was awarded several medals during his military career – the Air Medal with five Oak Leaf Clusters, the Army Commendation Medal (first Oak Leaf Cluster), the Good Conduct Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal, and the Korean Service Medal, in addition to others. During the Summit Conference in Paris, France, Mr. Johnson was selected to fly on the staff of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Mr. Johnson retired from the service in 1967 with the rank of Chief Warrant Officer Three. Upon his retirement, he became the first African American to work in management for the Beech Aircraft Corporation. He worked for Beech Aircraft for twenty-four years in various capacities, including Administrator of Aerospace Logistics Programs. When he retired from Beech Aircraft (now Raytheon), he started his third career as President and CEO of Diversified Educational Training and Manufacturing Company (DETAMC).

### **Pioneers**

These early African American Army Warrant Officer Aviators paved the path for others to follow. Their records of achievements were unparalleled. Their legacy is entrenched in history. After successfully charting outstanding military careers, they made other impacts in the civilian sector. In 1999, George T. Johnson was the recipient of the United States Small Business Administration (SBA) Welfare-to-Work Award. He received the award for his efforts to provide jobs for disadvantaged and disabled workers. Cleveland Valrey was awarded the Doctorate of Humane Letters from Payne Bible College and is the author of “Black Labor and the San Francisco Bay Area” and “Black Labor and Race - “San Francisco Bay Area in World War II”. He is also a 2005 inductee into the Army Ranger Hall of Fame. In 1992, Carl Burhanan became the sole owner of Oasis Aviation, a Marina del Rey, California based fuel-supply business with fueling contracts at 330 worldwide airports, involving 2,400 aircraft customers in 30 countries. Ezell Ware is President of Ezell Ware and Associates, a business development and public relations firm and lives in Austin, Texas. He is the author of a book entitled, “By Duty Bound –

Survival and Redemption in a Time of War”, his autobiography recounting his Vietnam experiences.

### **Recognition**

Major Ossie Peacock, President of the USABBA George Baker Chapter made the following remarks at a USABBA reunion in 2005, “I am here tonight out of respect, admiration and appreciation for the accomplishments and sacrifices by these gentlemen for the good of our Country. So to you gentlemen, I am deeply in debt and pray that when times get tough for those like me we can draw strength from the time honored service you gave in earning a right for us to serve.”

African American Warrant Officer Aviators – Pioneers – Leading the Way.