

African American Warrant Officers and the Tuskegee Airmen Experience

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Affrican American warrant officers were a part of the Tuskegee Airmen Experience.

As early as 1941, with the activation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron (March 15, 1941) and with the forming of the 66th Army Air Forces Flight Training Detachment (July 1941), African American Warrant Officers performed in key positions, contributing to the success of their organizations, and making a significant impact on the heritage and legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen.

The staff of the 66th included Robert R. Snead, warrant officer, photo section; Edward A. Edghill, warrant officer junior grade, engineering; Glenn L. Head, warrant officer, armament; Hollis T. Arnold, warrant officer junior grade, officers pay section; and Richard B. Rutledge, warrant officer junior grade, headquarters personnel.

My research found that Glenn L. Head later was assigned to the 477th Bombardment Group. He is listed as one of the officers arrested for attempting to enter the white officer's club at Freeman Field in Seymour, Indiana. The incident is known as the "Freeman Field Mutiny".

Richard B. Rutledge was born on May 26, 1922 in Jersey City, New Jersey, but raised in Brooklyn, New York. On April 1, 1941, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Corps and was assigned to the ground crew of the 99th Pursuit Squadron.

Rutledge was commissioned as a Warrant Officer Junior Grade at Tuskegee Army Field on January 20, 1943 as an Administrative Officer. When the 99th Fighter Squadron departed Tuskegee in April or May 1943, he was transferred to an all black Engineer Aviation Squadron on March Field, Riverside, California, serving as the Adjutant for the Headquarters Company. Rutledge went in a convoy of over 100 ships under the command of Admiral "Bull" Halsey and was part of the Invasion of the Palau Islands on the South West Pacific. His battalion's job was to build an air field on the Island so that General Douglas MacArthur could use it on his return to the Philippines. However, President Truman ordered the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered, and the war ended. Rutledge served 20 months overseas and a total of five years from 1941 to 1946 in the Army Air Corps.

After the war, he attended New York University and Brooklyn Law School where he graduated in 1950, passed the N.Y. State Bar Exam and was admitted to practice as a lawyer in December 1950. Rutledge had a general practice of law for 34 years in Queens, New York. On January 1, 1985, he was elected to the Civil Court of the City of New York for a term of 10 years. He served the Queens County for 5 years. On the 5th year, Rutledge was appointed the Supervising Judge of the Court. On January 1, 1990, he was elected as Justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York for a term of 14 years. Rutledge served in Queens County for 7 years, retired on December 31, 1996 and moved to south Florida.

Theodore Roosevelt (T.R.) Davidson was born in York, South Carolina. Initially, he was accepted into the aviation program and was a member of Class 45-E. However, he washed out as a cadet and was later appointed as a warrant officer. He was assigned to the 1868th Aviation Engineers Battalion (Colored) and performed the duties of an aviation maintenance warrant. The 1868th Aviation Engineers Battalion was formed at the Greenville Army Air Base, South Carolina on 18 Jan 45 and was inactivated on 31 May 46 in Guam.

Mr. Davidson was discharged in 1946. He had a total time in the military of two years and six months. After his discharge, Mr. Davidson studied at Tennessee State College and eventually became a flight instructor and taught aviation mechanics at that institution.

Vernon Hopson was born in Lee County, Texas and grew up in La Grange, 60 miles, southeast of Austin. He entered military service in July 1943 and applied for Aviation Cadet Flight Training while assigned to Biloxi, Mississippi. Hopson graduated in Class 44-I-SE on November 20, 1944, and was promoted to the rank of Flight (Warrant) Officer. Hopson was assigned to the Operational Training Unit in North Carolina, and was soon assigned as a fighter pilot with the 477th Composite Group, flying P-47s to escort B-25 bombers for deployment to the Pacific.

The 477th assignment was cut short due to the end of the war, but Hopson remained in the Air Force, and began a career in the Air Traffic Control, serving in this capacity in locations such as Japan, Guam, Korea, Greenland and Italy. Hopson retired from the military in 1963 after 20 years of service.

His field of expertise continued in his civilian life with the FAA, becoming one of America's first Black Air Traffic Controllers working with the Air Traffic Control in Chicago, Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota, until his retirement after 23 years, in 1987. Mr. Hopson died on August 28, 2009 at the age of 84 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

George DeWitt Abercrombie was born on November 9, 1922. He grew up in rural Alabama, a coal miner's son. George was drafted into the Army at age 20, initially with service troops doing menial labor. He was then transferred to the Tuskegee Airmen. Mr. Abercrombie maintained the records that charted the progress of pilots as they developed their skills, whether it was flying in formation or performing acrobatic maneuvers.

During his military career, he was stationed in Alabama, Germany, New York, Texas, Arizona, and Germany, again. Mr. Abercrombie retired in 1968 as a chief warrant officer. He was a manager with IBM in New York and earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Empire State College. He retired from his second career in 1992 and moved to Tampa, Florida. Abercrombie died on December 4, 2009 at the age of 87 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Tuskegee Airmen Experience. There were other warrant officers that served in what is called the "Tuskegee Experience". The "Tuskegee Experience" includes anyone, man or woman, military or civilian, black or white, who served at Tuskegee Army Air Field or in any of the programs stemming from the 'Tuskegee Experience' between the years 1941 and 1949. There were an estimated 16,000 persons in the above category.

Tuskegee Airmen is the name given to the group of African America pilots trained at Tuskegee Air Field in Alabama. During World War II, many were assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group. This Fighter Group included the 99th Fighter Squadron that began training in July 1941 and served with distinction in North Africa and the European Theater. By the end of the war, 992 pilots were trained Tuskegee. Of the graduates, 450 pilots deployed overseas for combat duty. Sixty six pilots lost their lives in combat. Other Tuskegee Airmen were assigned to the 477th Bombardment Group. They underwent extensive tactical training for assignment in the Pacific Theater of Operations. President Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan ended their mission. Also, recognized as Tuskegee Airmen are the approximately 16,000 African American men and women who were trained for service in the Army Air Corps.

These personnel included crew chiefs, mechanics, communication specialists, cooks, medical technicians, doctors, nurses, parachute riggers, administrative clerks, military policemen, flight instructors, navigators, and bombardiers.

And, of course, Warrant Officers! (Control + Click on each picture for more information)



Vernon Hopson



Richard B. Rutledge



George DeWitt Abercrombie