



Bob Ashby at a 1985 Tuskegee Airmen gathering

MY STORY

World War II started while I was in high school. This brought on immediate concerns as to my future. America began the process of mobilization for the war. Where was I to fit into this? Even though a large part of the United States was no longer segregated, the armed forces were. I did not see myself serving as a truck driver, a cook or a mess attendant in a Navy officers club.

I was delivering the black newspapers to the black community as a means of earning money. These newspapers covered information that was of concern to black communities that was not reported in the mainstream newspapers. I read articles about the need for blacks to be included throughout the armed forces. An effort by responsible black leaders was made to secure an equal representation of blacks into all branches of the military. This was a continuous battle because of the strong opposition by many whites that espoused the idea that blacks were incapable of grasping anything but the most menial of tasks.

After a long struggle, certain concessions were made, one being the establishment of an experimental program to see if blacks were capable of learning to fly. This was something I was looking to, so I immediately started gathering information about the program. I was not yet 18 years old, therefore not about to be drafted, so I had time to plan how I could enter this program.

Gathering all the information that I could about the requirements for acceptance into this program, I started studying things about the theory of flight, weather, etc. Lucky for me, a class in aviation was started at my high school, and I immediately enrolled. The next thing I did was to enlist in the Air Corp Reserve to insure that I would not be drafted into the Army or Navy. Now all I had to do was to continue my studies and wait to be called to active duty after I turned eighteen.

I received orders to report to Fort Dix in New Jersey in July of 1944 to begin processing for active duty. Upon completion of processing I was assigned to Keesler Field Air Base in Missouri for basic training. Upon completion of basic training, the testing for acceptance as an aviation cadet began.

I knew it would require my passing the tests and physical to enter the cadet program. I had no idea just how extensive the testing was. However, after three days of testing I was informed that I had passed and was now an Aviation Cadet. As soon as a vacancy opened up at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama, I would be transferred there to begin flight training. I was thrilled and proud to be one of the few selected for the program.

After transferring to Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF) to begin the cadet training, it hit me about what I was trying to achieve. I had never been near an airplane, didn't even know how to drive a car, in fact, only ridden in a car a few times. My usual means of transportation were bicycles, buses and subways. I always had the feeling that if someone else had accomplished something, I knew that I could also. So with this determination I set out to accomplish my goal of becoming a pilot.

We, the cadets, knew that this program was on an experimental basis, and it was constantly under attack by the War Department and Military who wanted to cancel the program. Because of the stringent selection requirements, the men chosen for the program were all determined to see this program succeed. We helped each other, supported and encouraged each other to make sure we did succeed. We were determined that the program would not fail because we could not accomplish the task; they would have to take it away from us.

After graduating from the cadet program, earning my pilot wings and being commissioned as a second lieutenant, I went on to have an illustrious career in the military, serving in the occupation of Japan, Korea, and finally in England, retiring as a lieutenant colonel in 1965.

Upon retiring from the military, I set my sights on becoming a commercial airline pilot. Prior to retiring, I sent applications to all of the major airlines requesting employment as a pilot. The only positive acknowledgement I received came from United Airlines. I went to Denver, Colorado, and completed all the necessary requirements for hiring. I was hired as a Flight Operation Instructor, teaching in the classrooms, simulators, and airplanes. The first airplane that I instructed on was the Boeing 727 aircraft. I was disappointed that I was not hired as a Flight Instructor, teaching captains and first officers to fly the airplane, even though I was an instructor in just about every plane that I flew while in the military.

While I was with the Strategic Air Command, I was appointed as a Select Crew and given a spot promotion from major to lieutenant colonel because of my ability. Instead, my airplane duties were to teach the second officers (flight engineers) the operation of the airplane systems. It appeared that the airlines did not hire blacks to instruct the captains or first officers to fly the airplane. When United Airlines ordered the Boeing 747, I was selected as a member of the team that wrote the pilot instruction manual in systems and airplane operation. When UA hired me, they were in the process of transitioning all of their pilots from propeller-driven airplanes to jets. Upon completion of the transition, the training requirements fell to a very low level; only pilots upgrading to another airplane or needing proficiency checks required training. After seven and a half years I was furloughed because of lack of seniority. Rather than wait to be recalled at a later date, I sent out employment applications again. Frontier Airlines in Denver hired me as a pilot.

I was the first black pilot to be hired by Frontier Airlines, there were a few pilots that did not welcome me into their midst. Frontier Airlines also hired the first woman pilot at this time. A few pilots greeted her with the same reactions. However, I had an enjoyable career with FA, flying the DHC-6, CV-580, Boeing 737, and the McDonald MD-80 aircraft, retiring in July 1986 as a Captain.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the failure of commercial airlines to hire exceedingly highly qualified black pilots following World War II. Hundreds of skilled Tuskegee Airmen returned to civilian life but were unable to find jobs with commercial airlines. I was the only Tuskegee Airman hired by a scheduled airline. This has to be a serious indictment of the scheduled airlines. Today, thankfully, this practice has changed, and the airline industry has made great strides in hiring minorities.

Robert "Bob" Ashby