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Black Wings: Our Forgotten Heroes

I hope by now that you are aware of the "Black Wings" exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum in Washington. It is scheduled to last for two years. But I hope, after reading this column and/or seeing the phenomenal testimony to blacks in aviation, you will write the secretary of the Smithsonian and request that our history become a permanent part of this prestigious institution.

A part of the exhibit is "Wings of War," the World War II story of blacks fighting for the right to fight, the subsequent establishment of the all-black 99th Fighter Squadron and later the 332nd Fighter Group. These 10,000 black men and women are commonly referred to as the Tuskegee Airmen.

The Smithsonian's first black curator, Louis R. Purnell, was a pilot in the original 99th and the original 332nd. There were few pilots in either outfit who saw more action than he did. He flew 88 combat missions; because of segregation, white pilots had more replacements and few about 50 missions before rotating home. Purnell was typical of all black pilots in one respect: he was shot at 20 times more than white pilots!

However, accomplishments and contributions comprise "Black Wings." I was interviewing Purnell, Art Carter (WWII war correspondent of the *Afro-American*), pilot Elwood Driver and Alfred "Chief" Anderson at the exhibit for a four-part Black History Month special on the Tuskegee Airmen called "The Black Eagles."

Seeing this "living" history and hearing these men recall a part of history that has been tucked away or ignored gave me a feeling of being there myself. "Chief" Anderson, the acknowledged "Father of Black Aviation," is still a flying instructor and witty and spry at 76 years of age.

He recalled with detail the first transcon-

tinental flight by black aviators. He and Dr. Albert Forsythe were a great team and the "Chief" proudly pointed to the picture and caption in the exhibit: "Goodwill Flight to Nassau in 1934. Residents of Nassau greeted Alfred Anderson and Dr. Albert Forsythe after their flight from Miami in 1934."

To a man, each Tuskegee Airman will remind you of the tremendous influence that Anderson had on their lives as the chief flight instructor at Tuskegee Army Airfield during World War II. He has trained the majority of black combat pilots and hundreds of others.

TONY BROWN COMMENTS

TONY BROWN



Other pioneers displayed are Bessie Coleman, who became the first licensed black pilot in this country. Of course, because of racism, she had to go to France to train and be licensed. Eugene Bullard, a native of Columbus, Ga., had gone to France years before Bessie Coleman and became the world's first black combat pilot and a much-decorated member of the Lafayette Flying Corps during World War I. Because of discrimination, Bullard never fought for America.

Of course, the first black pilot to shoot down an enemy plane for America was Lt. Charles Hall. This native of Brazil, Ind., was a member of the original 99th when he destroyed a German Focke-Wulf 190 over Castelvetrano on July 2, 1943.

The exhibit goes on to display America's lost combat-pilot heroes. There is the towering Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., no doubt the most celebrated member of the 99th or the 332nd. He commanded both groups as well as the 477th Composite Group.

Gen. Davis, now retired, was the fourth black graduate from West Point when he finished in 1936. No black had graduated in the previous 47 years. Although he ranked a very respectable 35th in a class of 276, his white peers forced Davis to room alone and be "silenced" during his entire stay at the academy.

"Black Wings" also has a model of the P-51 "Miss Pelt," Clarence "Lucky" Lester's plane during the war. This Tuskegee flyer of the 332nd Fighter Group, while in a fighter sweep on July 18, 1944, shot down three German Messerschmitts in a dogfight over the Po Valley in Italy, a remarkable feat performed in about six minutes.

"Lucky" told me in an interview for "The Black Eagles" special that when his daughter was a college student at Penn State, a white instructor told her class that blacks had never been pilots in World War II. When she said her father had been one, he called the story a lie. And even after being shown "Lucky's" scrapbook, he ignored the evidence.

That's an example of the virulent form of racism loose in this country that we must resist. And we must repel it with the facts by digging into our history — then preserving it.

You can help preserve these heroic feats and role models for our people by writing the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Dr. S. Dillon Ripley, at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560, and requesting that the "Black Wings" exhibit be made permanent.

If you don't, and the history is lost to future generations, these brave men and women will have died in vain.

"Tony Brown's Journal," the television series, can be seen on public television Tuesdays on Channel 26 at 7:30 p.m. It can also be seen on Channel 26 Sundays at 6:30 p.m. Please consult listings.

People Of The Year

We are happy to report that it was not easy to choose our first man and woman of the year.

That fact delights us because it means that a number of people have made significant and selfless contributions to the black community here both in 1982 and years prior.

They include Louise Wilson, Victor Johnson, Mazie Woodruff, Clifton Graves, Howard Wiley, Geneva Hill, Beverly Mitchell, Vivian Burke, Larry Womble, Georgia Moore, Norma Smith, Vera Phillips, Walter Marshall, Patrick Hairston, Dr. C.B. Hauser and others too numerous to mention in this space.

We salute them all, and encourage you to give them words of thanks and support when you see them. More importantly, we ask that you join them in their efforts to make life better for us all.

As for the winners of this year's awards, Mrs. Virginia K. Newell and Larry D. Little have clearly demonstrated their concern for Winston-Salem's black community during the past 12 months, waging often unseen battles to accomplish their goals.

Mrs. Newell, of course, was a vital cog in the movement to make the East Winston Shopping Center a reality. The tangible result of her efforts sits on Claremont Avenue, but few probably realize the tangle of negotiations and controversy that preceded the project. She does.

And while Mrs. Newell isn't the only one who worked to see the shopping center through, her determination to

make the concept work and to cooperate with the mayor and other city officials as well as the developers and members of the community stand to be congratulated:

Mrs. Newell also had a hand in numerous other projects, including the East Winston Crime Task Force, the Committee to Promote Black Ownership and the East Winston Restoration Association.

Lest we forget, Mrs. Newell also finds the time to be an alderman and chairman of the mathematics department at Winston-Salem State University.

Larry Little is an alderman, too, and his major contributions in 1982 include his involvement with the Black Leadership Roundtable Coalition, a group he organized and chaired and which served as a valuable conduit of information during both the primaries and the general election. The Roundtable also aided the NAACP's voter registration efforts and offered informed endorsements as signposts for black voters.

Little worked as well with residents in the Liberty-Patterson community, helping displaced residents negotiate relocation settlements with R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co.

And he continued to provide friendship and advice to youth, especially young athletes, and, most importantly, to maintain strong rapport with the grassroots community which nurtured his political and personal growth.

Mrs. Newell and Mr. Little, thank you for caring.

A Love Offering

Pat Hairston's job is about as thankless as they come.

As NAACP president, the 57-year-old retired blue collar worker is fully expected to champion the civil rights of whomever in the black community feels he has been wronged.

Toward that end, Hairston sacrifices his time and money, ruffles the feathers of the powers that be and opens himself to criticism and abuse.

In return, Hairston gets more criticism -- this variety from the people he serves -- and an incredible lack of support and gratitude.

Witness the shameful turnout at last spring's Freedom Fund Banquet.

Witness the disproportionate amount of support the local NAACP receives from the white business sector -- not black people -- to stay financially solvent.

And witness the fact that Hairston works as hard as he does without the benefit of a salary.

As one black elected official said recently, "Black folks around here

can come out of their pockets to give love offerings to their ministers. They ought to do the same for Pat Hairston."

We second that motion.

Why not a love offering for Hairston, whose work has touched The Great Bourgeois Pretenders among us as well as the grassroots?

Why not an appeal by ministers and community leaders and fraternal and social organizations and black businesses for their clients and memberships to give something back to a man who has given so much to them?

Or a movement by individuals to save the cash they spend during one week on movies that ignore the existence of black people or papier mache hamburgers that ignore the existence of nutrition or liquor or *The National Enquirer* to show this man that we recognize his worth to us?

It's one of the best New Year's resolutions that we can think of.

Be It Resolved: An Agenda For 1983

Whereas, the African-American community of North America has made significant progress, yet has so far to go, and,

Whereas, in this new year 1983, we collectively and individually need to recommit ourselves to the principle of "self-help," and,

Whereas, the principles of Kwanza and the Congressional Black Caucus' Family Plan offer us guidance as to how to better ourselves and our community,

Be it resolved that, in the continuing struggle to secure political parity and economic equity for people of color in this land and around this world, we shall in 1983:

- either join or renew our membership with an existing civil rights organization (e.g. NAACP, Operation PUSH or SCLC).
- encourage our respective churches to be more community-minded and to consider pooling their considerable resources into a "self-help" development fund.
- make a concerted effort to buy AND bank black. (The sisters and brothers will appreciate your business).

CLIFTON GRAVES



• support (financially and otherwise) the United Negro College Fund and/or the historically black college of our choice. (If you didn't attend a black college, then adopt one).

• volunteer as a Big Brother or Big Sister. (The program really needs black adults).

• promise ourselves to read more and broaden our horizons.

• become more politically astute consumers by supporting the NAACP's Fair Share and PUSH's "selective buying" campaigns.

• join or renew our memberships with vital community entities as the Friends of the East Winston Library and the Patterson Avenue YMCA.

• take a more active interest in international affairs -- especially matters pertaining to Africa and the Caribbean; joining Washington-based TransAfrica is an excellent way to expedite this.

• regularly attend Board of Aldermen, school board and county commissioners meetings to stay informed, as well as provide support for those whom we put in office.

• patronize and monitor the East Winston Shopping Center; also, encourage the management to name the complex after a prominent local African-American.

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THE SENATE RECOGNIZES THE DISTINGUISHED GENTLEMAN FROM NORTH CAROLINA

About Letters...

The *Chronicle* welcomes letters to the editor as well as guest columns. Letters should be typed or neatly printed and concise in length. They should also include the full name, address and phone number of the writer.

Letters should be addressed to Chronicle Letters, Winston-Salem Chronicle, P.O. Box 3154, Winston-Salem, N.C. 27102.

The *Chronicle* reserves the right to edit letters for brevity and good taste and asks readers to remember that letters published within our pages do not necessarily reflect our views.