

**TUSKEGEE AIRMEN ACTIVISTS AFTER WORLD WAR II**  
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**by Daniel L. Haulman**  
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Historians often associate the exemplary performance of the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II with the desegregation of the American armed forces just after the war. After all, they proved that black men could fly in combat as well as anyone else, and that they could perform well as officers in charge of their own squadrons and groups. Even if their influence on President Truman's 1948 issuance of Executive Order 9981, which mandated integration in the armed forces, was indirect, they directly contributed to the Air Force's decision to integrate, and the Air Force was the first of the military services to achieve significant integration in 1949. Yet it would be misleading to say that the only contribution the Tuskegee Airmen made to racial equality was to encourage the integration of the armed forces not long after World War II. Many of the Tuskegee Airmen were important players in the post-war Civil Rights Movement, and continued to influence the reform of American society after their military service.

After World War II, many of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African American pilots in U.S. military service, remained in uniform, some serving their

country in two later wars. The best known became Air Force generals. Among them were Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., former commander of the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group, and the 477<sup>th</sup> Composite Group, during World War II. He became the first black general in the United States Air Force (as his father had previously served as the first black general in the United States Army). General Daniel “Chappie” James, who had served in the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment (later 477<sup>th</sup> Composite) Group, served in combat in Korea and Vietnam as a fighter pilot, and later became the first black four-star general in the Air Force or in any service. A third Tuskegee Airman, Lucius Theus, also became a general in the U.S. Air Force, after having served at Tuskegee Army Air Field just after World War II, and then in Vietnam. After his return from Vietnam in the summer of 1967, Theus served in the Office of Comptroller of the Air Force, and served also as Chairman of the Inter-Service Task Force on Education in Race Relations, Office of the Secretary of Defense. His task force’s recommendations led to the establishment of the Defense Race Relations Institute and the Department of Defense’s education program in race relations.<sup>1</sup>

Other Tuskegee Airmen who did not become generals continued to serve their country in the United States Air Force after its establishment in 1947, many of them taking part in three wars. For example, Tuskegee Airman Charles

**McGee, who flew fighter missions in World War II, also flew fighter missions during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and accumulated a total of 409 combat missions, more than any other African American pilot. He retired as a colonel. George Hardy is another Tuskegee Airman who took part in combat missions in the same three wars. During World War II, he flew fighters. In Korea, he flew in bombers, and in Vietnam, he flew gunships. He retired as a lieutenant colonel. These are only a few examples of many Tuskegee Airmen who remained in military service after World War II, and who rose in its ranks.<sup>2</sup>**

**Many of the Tuskegee Airmen left military service after World War II, but also became very successful. For example, Roscoe Brown, who earned his doctorate after the war, became a leading educator in New York. Coleman Young, who had belonged to the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group as a bomber crew member, and took part in the Freeman Field Mutiny, was elected in 1973 as the first African American mayor of Detroit, and he took office there in 1974. He served as Detroit's mayor for more years than anyone else. Other Tuskegee Airmen were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. They included William T. Coleman, Robert L. Carter, Richard Harris, Lincoln Ragsdale, Luther Oliver, Dabney Montgomery, Percy Sutton, Milton Henry, and Coleman Holt. There were a great many others, as well, but these are just some examples.<sup>3</sup>**

While a lieutenant in the Army Air Corps, William T. Coleman advised his fellow officers in the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, when some of them had been arrested during the “Freeman Field Mutiny” of April 1945, to ask for a lawyer, a move that contributed to dropping of the charges for most of them a few days later. Coleman had legal training, and continued it after the war.<sup>4</sup> He went on to become the first black clerk of the Supreme Court, hired by Justice Felix Frankfurter in 1948. He served the court during the debates over *Brown v. Board of Education*, during which he favored integration of public schools.<sup>5</sup> In 1975, President Gerald R. Ford appointed William T. Coleman as Secretary of Transportation, and Coleman became only the second black member of a President’s cabinet.<sup>6</sup>

Robert L. Carter’s story is also of interest. He once served in the 96<sup>th</sup> Air Service Group at Tuskegee Army Air Field, and then moved with it to Michigan. He had hoped to deploy with the group and the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group to Italy, but he was transferred to another base in Michigan instead. There he had friction with his white commander, and was tried in a court martial in which he was defended by none other than William H. Hastie, who had once served as the President’s representative regarding African Americans in the U.S. Army. Despite his defense, Carter was found guilty and dismissed from the Army Air

Forces. He later went on to serve on Thurgood Marshall's team of NAACP attorneys during the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, a case that reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson* and its doctrine of separate but equal. Carter argued the Brown case before the Supreme Court. A former Tuskegee Airmen, he was instrumental in overturning segregation in the nation's public schools.<sup>7</sup>

Two of the Tuskegee Airmen pilots in World War II, Richard H. Harris and Luther L. Oliver, were from Montgomery, Alabama, and both became civil rights activists after the war. Harris graduated from advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field in class 43F on 30 June 1943, while Oliver graduated in class 45A on 11 Mar 1945.<sup>8</sup> According to Joseph Caver, a history professor at Alabama State University, Harris owned and operated Dean's Drug Store during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, following the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat on an Montgomery bus in 1955. He was a personal friend and neighbor of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his family, and "his pharmacy parking lot served as a routing center for those needing transportation to their jobs during the Boycott." Tuskegee Airman Luther Harris was also active in the Civil Rights Movement, and served on the Montgomery City Council when blacks were more able to vote and hold office in Alabama's capital city.<sup>9</sup>

**Lincoln Ragsdale is another example of a Tuskegee Airman who later became active in the Civil Rights Movement. He graduated on 20 November 1945 from advanced flying training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, in class 45H (Single Engine). After World War II, he moved to the Phoenix area of Arizona and became active in the movement for desegregation of schools, neighborhoods, and places of public accommodation. He also advocated increased opportunities for African Americans to vote.<sup>10</sup>**

**Dabney N. Montgomery is another good example of a Tuskegee Airman who later took part in the Civil Rights Movement. Born in Selma, Alabama, in 1923, during World War II he served in the 1051<sup>st</sup> Quartermaster Company, which served with the 96<sup>th</sup> Air Service Group and the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group, other Tuskegee Airmen organizations that were stationed in Italy during combat operations in World War II. Although he moved to New York after the war, he returned to his native town for the famous Selma to Montgomery voting rights march led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in March of 1965. In fact, Montgomery served as one of Dr. King's bodyguards during the famous march.<sup>11</sup>**

**Percy Sutton was another Tuskegee Airman who took part in the Civil Rights movement. He was an intelligence officer during World War II, and ended his service with the Army Air Forces with the rank of Captain. During the**

Korean War, he went back into military service, this time in the U.S. Air Force. When the Korean War ended, he opened a law practice, after having gone to law school in New York between the wars. He took on civil rights cases, and in 1961, he volunteered to join the Freedom Riders in Mississippi. He became attorney for Malcolm Little, otherwise known as Malcolm X, the famous black militant, until the latter was assassinated in 1965. He continued to represent Malcolm X's wife, Betty Shabazz, after the death of her husband. In 1966, Percy Sutton was elected president of the Manhattan Borough of New York, and remained in that position until 1977. He became a millionaire, and purchased the Apollo Theater in Harlem in 1981, converting it from a crumbling ruin into a center of black entertainment by 1985.<sup>12</sup>

Milton Henry was another Tuskegee Airman who had an association with Malcolm X. Before he went to flight training in Tuskegee, he was stationed as an enlisted man at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama. In the spring of 1942, he got into an altercation with a segregationist bus driver in the city. The bus driver probably would have shot him had not Royal Air Force cadets who were training at Maxwell helped usher him off the bus.<sup>13</sup>

Despite his frustration in Montgomery, Milton Henry applied to be an aviation cadet in the flight training program at Tuskegee. He completed primary

flight training at Moton Field and then basic and advanced flight training at Tuskegee Army Air Field, graduating on June 30, 1943 after 27 weeks of flight training. He was a member of class 43F (single engine). He became a fighter pilot, but he did not go overseas. He was assigned to the 553rd Fighter Squadron at Selfridge Field, Michigan, which provided replacement pilots for Tuskegee Airmen units overseas.<sup>14</sup>

In early January 1944, Milton Henry was one of the leaders of African American officers who attempted to enter the Selfridge Field officers' club, which was then closed to blacks. The base commander gave him a direct order to leave the club, and he complied. He continued to resist the authority of white officers at Selfridge, however, and in March he was charged with several counts of being absent without leave, of failure to report, and of disrespect for superior officers. After court martial, in April, he was convicted on all counts and dishonorably discharged from the Army Air Forces.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1960s, he evolved into one of the most militant of black militants. The process was gradual. Between 1961 and 1965, he and his brother Richard published a bimonthly newspaper in Detroit they called "Illustrated News," which appealed to the African American community in the city. On June 23, 1963, he recorded a speech by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during the "Great



**March to Freedom” in Detroit, and helped MOTOWN manufacture a record based on his recording. The next month, he served as an attorney during a case regarding the fatal shooting by Detroit police of Cynthia Scott, an African American woman.<sup>16</sup>**

**As time passed, Milton Henry became more extreme. In October 1963, he and a few others founded the Freedom Now Party, a party designed for African Americans. In November 1963, at the Grassroots Leadership Conference in Detroit, he recorded a speech by Malcolm X, a speech at which Rosa Parks, also a resident of Detroit at the time, attended. In the autumn of 1964, Milton Henry ran for Congress in the Freedom Now Party. He lost. Around the same time, Milton and his brother Richard founded the Afro-American Broadcasting Company, which often played recordings of Malcolm X’s speeches. Milton Henry actually accompanied Malcolm X on a trip to Africa, to meet black leaders there. At an Afro-American Broadcasting Company awards ceremony, on February 14, 1965, at which Rosa Parks was one of the honorees, Malcolm X was the main speaker. After Malcolm X was assassinated, a week later, Milton Henry served as one of the pallbearers at the funeral.<sup>17</sup>**

**On March 29, 1968, Milton Henry and his brother Richard attended a gathering of black power activists in Detroit. They demanded that the United**

States government pay billions of dollars in reparations to African Americans for slavery. Three days later, they were involved in the declaration of a Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa. Milton Henry became its vice president. The Republic of New Africa hoped to turn part or all of the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, all of which had large African American populations, into a nation for blacks, separate from the United States, in reparation for slavery. Milton Henry changed his name to the more African-sounding Gaidi Obadele. The one-time Tuskegee Airman had by then become one of the most militant of black militants. That same year, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, reinforcing Obadele's militancy. Milton Henry's story, as a former Tuskegee Airman, is not typical, but it is noteworthy.<sup>18</sup>

Coleman T. Holt was another Tuskegee Airman who was involved in the struggle for black civil rights following World War II. He began primary flight training at Tuskegee's Moton Field late in the war, but did not complete the basic and advanced flying training phases. Still, having undergone some flight training at Tuskegee, he was considered to be a Tuskegee Airman. After the war, he completed law school, and was involved in the attempted desegregation of housing in Cicero, Illinois, a white neighborhood on the west

side of Chicago, in 1951. When Harvey Clark Jr., another World War II veteran, but not a Tuskegee Airman, attempted to move into the all-white neighborhood, he was taken away by police, and a major race riot erupted that lasted several nights. Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson called out the National Guard to restore order. Tuskegee Airman Coleman Holt, then a lawyer in Chicago, advocated the right of blacks such as Clark to live in whatever neighborhood they chose.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes people are tempted to think that the only contribution the Tuskegee Airmen made to racial integration and the struggle for racial justice was the possible influence of their World War II record on Truman, and his issuance of Executive Order 9981 in 1948 mandating the desegregation of the armed forces. But many of the Tuskegee Airmen, as individuals, were pioneers in the Civil Rights Movement, and they should be remembered for their influence on the revolutionizing of American society in the direction of racial equality. Persons like Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., Daniel “Chappie” James, Lucius Theus, Charles McGee, and George Hardy were pioneers in the racial integration of the U.S. Air Force, but we should also remember other Tuskegee Airmen, who, in their civilian careers after World War II, took part in the Civil Rights Movement: Roscoe Brown, Coleman Young, William T. Coleman, Robert L.

**Carter, Richard Harris, Luther Oliver, Lincoln Ragsdale, Dabney N. Montgomery, Percy Sutton, Milton Henry, Coleman T. Holt, and a great many others not mentioned in this article.**

**Daniel Haulman**

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<sup>1</sup> Biographies of USAF generals, on file at the Air Force Historical Research Agency.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Caver, Jerome Ennels, and Daniel Haulman, *The Tuskegee Airmen: An Illustrated History, 1939-1949* (Montgomery, AL: New South Books, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Charles E. Francis, *The Tuskegee Airmen: The Men Who Changed a Nation* (Boston: Branden Books, 2008), pp. 203-204.

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 209 and 304.

<sup>6</sup> Charles E. Francis, *The Tuskegee Airmen: The Men Who Changed a Nation* (Boston: Branden Books, 2008), pp. 203-204.

<sup>7</sup> J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 108-109; Raphael Cassimere, Jr., e-mail to Daniel Haulman, 3 Nov 2014..

<sup>8</sup> Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly, *Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2006), pp. 288 and 300.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Caver, e-mail to Daniel Haulman, 31 October 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly, *Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2006), p. 303; Larry M. Jackson, Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated, e-mail to Daniel Haulman, 31 Oct 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Speech, Honorable Charles B. Rangel, Congressman of New York, in the House of Representatives, May 15, 2013, published in *The Congressional Record*, May 15, 2013, "In Celebration of Dabney N. Montgomery's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday."

<sup>12</sup> J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 167; John Holway, *Red Tails* (Yucca Tree Press, 1997), p 305; Percy Ellis Sutton on The Biography.com website, retrieved Oct 30, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 10-11; John Holway, *Red Tails* (Yucca Tree Press, 1997) p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly, *Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2006), p. 289; History of Selfridge Field, 1944, at Air Force Historical Research Agency, call number 288.52-4.

<sup>15</sup> Charles W. Dryden, *A Train: Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), pp. 167-171; History of Selfridge Field, 1944, at Air Force Historical Research Agency, call number 288.52-4, pp. 203-204.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), pp. 175-178.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), pp. 178-180, 210-211.

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), pp. 223-225.

<sup>19</sup> Pritzker Military Library website, Chicago; "Race Riots" in the online *Encyclopedia of Chicago*; "Chicago Race Riots Happen," in online *African American Registry*; obituary for Coleman T. Holt in *Chicago Tribune*, 26 Jan 1999; obituary for Coleman T. Holt in *Chicago Sun-Times*, 23 Jan 1999; Homer A. Jack, "To Preserve White Neighborhoods: Cicero Nightmare," in the book *Reporting Civil Rights, Part 1, American Journalism, 1941-1963* (New York: the Library of America, 2003), pp. 130-133 (the original article appeared in *The Nation* on July 28, 1951).