

Operation Happiness: Tuskegee Airmen at Lockbourne Air Base, 1946-49

By Arnett Howard

During the winter, 2007, I got a call from **Connie Tracy**, public relations administrator for the **Columbus Regional Airport Authority (CRAA)**. Since I am weak for Connie, I let her take me to lunch at the Concourse Hotel and over a turkey rubeen sandwich, she conned me into doing months of work for no pay, no expenses and I would have to pay for my own supplies. What a deal; how could I say no?

The request that Connie had was to document a history of the legendary **Tuskegee Airmen** during the three years that the Black military men were stationed at **Lockbourne Air Base**, beginning in May, 1946. I had done a previous project with Connie and CRAA to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of **Port Columbus International Airport** in 2004 and she latched onto my passion for aviation history.

This was an invitation that was easy to get excited about, since I had started to accumulate bits of the Lockbourne Air Base saga from musicians and retirees that I had met. These men had shared with me first hand stories of their journeys to Columbus from the South to become a part of the postwar Air Force. Those Tuskegee/Lockbourne alumni included trombonist **Art Baskerville**, flight controller **Arthur Boudreaux**, Ohio Chapter Tuskegee President **Bob Peebles** and bomber pilot **Herdon "Don" Cummings**.

Some years before, I had captured a videotape that was a PBS broadcast featuring **Ivory Mitchell** and **Willie Ruff**, the musical **Mitchell-Ruff Duo**. Mitchell and Ruff had their beginnings as very

young airmen in 1947 and on this video on mentoring, told the story of a young airmen being taught music by an older airman and it included photographs and films, with commentary, to illustrate what Lockbourne was like during the late 1940s, “A Sepia Mecca unto itself rising on the Southern Ohio landscape.”

Before the Tuskegee Airmen, no African American had become a U.S. military pilot. In 1917, African-American men had tried to become aerial observers, but were rejected. However, African American Eugene Bullard served as one of the members of the Franco-American Lafayette Escadrille, a squadron of the French Air Service, the *Aéronautique militaire*, during World War I. Nonetheless, he was denied the opportunity to transfer to American military units as a pilot when other American pilots in the unit were offered the chance. Instead, Bullard returned to infantry duty with the French.

The racially motivated rejections of World War I African-American recruits sparked over two decades of advocacy by Black men who wished to enlist and train as military aviators. War Department tradition and policy mandated the segregation of African-Americans into separate military units staffed by White officers, as had been done previously. Buffalo soldiers were a Black unit who served in the west.

During the Second World War the Army Air Corps determined that the existing programs would be used for all units, including all-black units. At Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, this effort continued with the selection and training of the Tuskegee Airmen. In an effort to subvert the unit before it could commence operations, the War Department set up a system to accept only those with a level of flight experience or higher education, criteria

intended to exclude most applicants. The attempts to derail the unit by setting high standards of entry requirements, ensured that only the most able and intelligent Black personnel were able to join, contributing to the ultimate success of the Negro combat flyers.

The budding flight program at Tuskegee received a publicity boost when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt inspected it in March, 1941 and subsequently flew with African-American chief civilian instructor C. Alfred "Chief" Anderson. Anderson, who had been flying since 1929 and was responsible for training thousands of rookie pilots. He took his prestigious passenger on a half-hour flight in a Waco biplane and after landing, she cheerfully announced, "Well, you can fly all right."

The Tuskegee program began officially in June, 1941 with the 99th Pursuit Squadron at the Tuskegee Institute. The unit would consist of 47 officers and 429 enlisted men, and would be backed by an entire service arm. After basic training at Moton Field, they were moved to the nearby Tuskegee Army Air Field about ten miles to the west for conversion training onto operational types. The airmen were placed under the command of Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., then one of only two black line officers serving.

The 99th was finally considered ready for combat duty by April, 1943. It shipped out of Tuskegee on the second of April, bound for North Africa, where it would join the 33rd Fighter Group. By the spring of 1944, more graduates were ready for combat, and the all-black 332nd Fighter Group had been sent overseas with three fighter squadrons. Under the command of Colonel Davis, the squadrons were moved to mainland Italy, where the 99th Fighter

Squadron, assigned to the group joined them on June 6, 1944 at Ramitelli Airfield.

Flying escort for heavy bombers, the 332nd earned an impressive combat record. The Allies called these airmen "Red Tails" or "Red-Tail Angels," because of the distinctive crimson paint predominantly applied on the tail section of the unit's aircraft. The 332nd distinguished itself by allegedly never losing a bomber that it escorted to enemy fire, a record unmatched in the entire Fifteenth Army Air Corp, flying in the European Theater.

A B-25 bomb squadron, the 477th Bombardment Group, was forming in the U.S., but was not able to complete its training in time to see action. The 99th Fighter Squadron after its return to the United States became part of the 477th, redesignated the 477th Composite Group.

In early April, 1945, the 118th Base Unit transferred in from Godman Field, Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Its African-American personnel held orders that specified they were base cadre, not trainees. On April 5th, officers of the 477th peaceably tried to enter the Whites-only Officer's Club at Freeman Field in Seymour, Indiana. Col. Robert Selway, the groups commanding officer from Georgia, had been tipped off by a phone call, and had the assistant provost marshal and base billeting manager stationed at the door to refuse the 477th officers entry. A major ordered them to leave and took their names as a means of arresting them when they refused. It was the beginning of the Freeman Field Mutiny, in which 101 Tuskegee Airmen, all officers, were arrested.

In the wake of the Freeman Field Mutiny, on July 1, 1945, Colonel Robert Selway was relieved of the Group's command; he was replaced by Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. and a complete sweep of Selway's "white" staff followed, with all vacated jobs filled by African-American officers. The two squadron group, supported by the 602nd Engineer Squadron, the 118th Base Unit, and the 766th Air Corp Band, moved to its final station, Lockbourne Army Air Field.

I began my travels into this time machine by calling on my fellow historians **Jeff Darbee** and **Nancy Recchie**, husband and wife owners of **Benjamin D. Rickey and Company**. They had vacationed in during the summer of 2001 at **Maxwell Air Force Base** in Alabama and spent their time searching the archives of the **Air Force Historical Research Agency** for documents, photographs and squadron reports of the Black airmen during the heyday of the racially segregated Army Air Corps, 1941 to 1949.

After weeks of juggling our schedules, I met with the Darbee-Recchie Family and they produced the box of pages, pictures, discs and slides that had sat in their basement since a February, 2002. I looked through the box, separating pages from the images, hoping that I would be trusted to take the images with me to scan and then use my imaging software to enhance.

They did allow me to take the box of media home with me, but again, it sat for the summer, untouched because of the fortieth anniversary tour of Arnett Howard's Creole Funk Band and big obligations to the 2007 Lancaster Festival. But my calendar opened up in early August and I got to the work of scanning, enhancing, printing and sorting over three hundred images, in hopes of producing a book to be introduced at the 2007 air show,

A Gathering of Mustangs and Legends, September 27-30, 2007 at Lockbourne/Rickenbacker Air Base.

I also found time to get some days in at the Columbus Metropolitan Library, where the Microfiche Department had reels containing the **Ohio State News**, the publication that featured news of Black Ohioans during the war years. In three long days I was able to look at Lockbourne news, from speculation in January, 1946's Columbus Citizen that "Lockbourne was going become a Negro base full of troublemakers". My newspaper search ended with the "death march" that greeted a winning gunnery team when they returned from an Air Force competition in May, 1949.

The in-between years had news about **Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.** and his "tight ship", visits from military officials, staff promotions, weddings, track meets, radio model contests, air shows, Army Day parades, football games, visiting music and entertainment personalities, special holiday concerts in local night clubs, bridge games, the NCO Club, arrests, auto and airplane accidents, airmen's last rites and the debut of the ***Operation Happiness Show*** at Old Memorial Hall on Broad St.

I began printing pictures and gathering caption information to add color to the sixty year old images, many of which were shot by base photographer **Sgt. Bernard Hale**. I entered names into computer search engines, used magnifying lenses to get info from the prints and the slides that were photographs of squadron reports with pictures stapled to them.

Aside from the well-documented hero and base commander, Col. Ben Davis, Jr., a 1936 West Point graduate, who enduring four years of the silent treatment. A most fascinating personality

unearthed from the Darbee's photo treasures was **Lt. Willard W. "Chip" Savoy**. He was the base public relations officer from Washington, D.C.

The database search produced a book title under Lt. Savoy's authorship, *Alien Land*; a 1949 publication about a man of light complexion, who is pressured by the two racial identities that he existed in. I found an original copy on Amazon.com and it arrived in my mailbox in suprisingly good condition for being printed fifty-eight years previous. I also made contact with his daughter, **Dr. Lauret Savoy**, an educator at Mt. Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts.

Another interesting Lockbourne officer was **Major Vance H. Marchbanks**, Air Base Surgeon, who was well loved by his fellow airmen because of his skill at keeping them healthy. Later in his military career he played an important role at **National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)** in the 1960s. I later found out that Marchbanks' father, First Sergeant Vance Hunter Marchbanks, was a Buffalo Soldier with forty years of distinguished service in the U.S. Army.

When **Marine Lt. John Glenn** circled the earth in the **Friendship 7** capsule, becoming the first American to orbit the earth in space, Marchbanks monitored Glenn's respiration, pulse, temperature and heartbeat from a base in Kano, Nigeria. Colonel Marchbanks became a pioneer in the field of aeromedical research and later, aerospace medicine.

Then there was the beautiful photo of **Lt Allen G. Lane**, adjutant of the **100th Fighter Squadron**, from Demopolis, Alabama. He was forced to bail out of his plane set afire by flak bursts over Italy during January, 1944. In early 1949, while returning to Lockbourne from a cross country training flight, his P-47 fighter's

engine failed and he died on impact. I found the news story that documented his accident and the young family that was left to grieve him as a hero.

But most interesting was the story of the musical unit of Lockbourne, the 766th Air Corp Band and its leader, **Chief Warrant Officer John Brice**. Warrant Officer Brice had spent the better part of thirty-five years in Washington, D.C. teaching military science and history in the ROTC program at Howard University. He made lasting friendships playing society and birthday concerts for presidents in Washington and it said that he knew every general's wife's birthday.

Warrant Officer Brice was a perfectionist and wanted to instill in his young musicians discipline. He wanted his players to be the best players and to be able to excel at the classics, so that when opportunities opened to musicians of color, they would be prepared. Like Col. Davis, Brice was a tough task-master and had little patience for those musicians who didn't apply themselves, like pianist Ivory Mitchell.

According to French hornist Willie Ruff, Mitchell was raised in Dunedin, Florida, by a divorced and domineering father. A naturally gifted musical child, Mitchell played the piano as soon as he pulled himself up to walk and his childhood was free from tyrannical piano teachers, who insisted on scales, finger drills or other exercises. When he got into the service he had the gift of music, but no discipline, much to the chagrin of Warrant Officer Brice.

There was a running battle between the two; Brice thought that such a gift demanded seriousness and Mitchell wore the sloppiest uniform, saluted as if he were swatting flies and would run off rather than take target practice with the rest of the soldiers. But

for the Sunday concerts, when Brice would lead the orchestra in Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto*, it was Mitchell who played the piano so sensationally.

Retired Judge Robert Duncan remembers Ivory Mitchell very clearly. Duncan was a student at the Ohio State University in the late 1940s and he remembers that Mitchell took a class at OSU and during lunch hours he would come over to the Old Ohio Union. "All sorts of piano players would come over and play during lunch hour and Ivory would play almost every week while he was a student. He was fabulous."

Another of Warrent Officer Brice's thorns was **Lt. Colonel Joseph Goetz**, the head of Army Air Corps special services and entertainment in Washington, D.C. He landed at Lockbourne in August, 1948 and upon seeing the air base's talent show, Goetz, a flamboyant officer, well-connected with the entertainment industry, figured that he had found a unit to prepared for a show that featured polished routines, dancing girls, comedians, as well as the musicians.

Brice hated everything that Col. Goetz was concocting and went ahead with his symphonic music making. But illness struck; Brice was diagnosed with leukemia and hospitalized. Before too long Chief Warrant Officer John Brice succumbed to the illness and with his passing, Col. Goetz returned to Lockbourne to begin rehearsals for his new show, *Operation Happiness*.

The cast included Lt. Alvin Downing, the base special services officer as musical director, Pfc Ivory Mitchell on piano and Lt. Daniel "Chappy" James, the future four star general, was chosen as master of ceremonies. Within ninety days of the start of rehearsal, *Operation Happiness* had its Christmas, 1948 premier at Old Memorial Hall in Downtown Columbus to glorious reviews.

Operation Happiness was a fun-packed and enjoyable show of dancing, comedy, magic acts, jazz, swing and symphonic music. The star of the show was PFC Calvin Manuel, a professional actor before entering the service, who performed in five different acts as a singer, tap dancer and comedian. The show also featured WAC Evelyn Matthews, who sang "I'll Close My Eyes", accompanied by an airmen chorus.

She was followed by another chorus called the Skylanders and a dance group called the Lockettes. The show featured WAC Sgt. Verline Jones, who sang "Stormy Weather", WAC Rebecca Gilbert, who performed a top hat, white tie dance and Pfc Mitchell who gave piano renditions in jazz, swing and the classical Warsaw Concerto.

The show also consisted of a rendition of "Run Joe" by Lt. James, a magic act by Sgt. George Crawley, a Jitterbug drill team led by Sgt. Charles Cook, a tap dance team consisting of Pfc Manual and Sgt. Gilbert, who danced to the tune of *Tea For Two*.

Lastly Sgt. Bill Chatman sang "It's Magic" and the show ended with a thrilling piano battle between Pfc Mitchell and Lt. Downing. In the finale, the entire cast, accompanied by the Lockbourne Base Band, sang the Air Corps song;

A1. Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun.
Here they come, zooming to meet our thunder.
At 'em boys, Give 'er the gun!
Down we dive, spouting our flame from under.
Off with one heckuva roar!
We live in fame or go down in flame.
Hey! Nothing'll stop the U.S. Air Force

Trombonist Art Baskerville was a member of the Lockbourne 766th Band and Operation Happiness. He says that the band had eighteen members, with eight chorus girls, a glee club and comedians and they traveled in three airplanes, Douglas C-47s or DC-3s.

The Ohio State News, a Black community publication, said in its December 25, 1948 edition, "More than 2500 citizens of Columbus and Franklin County walked out of Memorial Hall Wednesday night gloriously happy as a result of Lockbourne Air Base's presentation of Operation Happiness. It was a great present from the airmen to the people of our town." The reviewer, George Lawrence, went on, "The only discouraging thing was the fact that everybody didn't get to see this show; for the eighty-five airmen, including WAFs (Women in the Air Force) and enlisted men from Lockbourne put everything they had into *Operation Happiness*." He was quoted that the show was to be presented only to airmen in the U.S. and abroad.

According to Willie Ruff, who also played in the orchestra, the Pentagon was solidly behind *Operation Happiness*, the budget seemed unlimited and the touring itinerary included every military installation in the U.S. that had an airstrip large enough for the passenger and cargo planes to land. Col. Goetz spared no expense when he ordered costumes and equipment.

Ruff commented, "Our line of chorus girls were a dozen strong, our comedians got laughs with clean material and our magician could charm the world. We were a road show and a damn good one." It took a year to cover all of the air bases and Ruff says that "*Operation Happiness* was the best money the military ever put into public relations."

For all of Warrant Officer Brice's fears, *Operation Happiness* was presented as a family show with a surprising level of sophistication. Its star was Lt. Daniel "Chappy" James, who mc'd with wit and finesse. After performing at a number of bases, the show was performed at a USAF World Wide Personnel Conference in Orlando, Florida.

It was such a hit that installations throughout the United States, Europe and the Far East requested its performance. But very shortly, the U.S. Air Force became the first of the military branches to fully integrate the services and the show ended.

On May 11, 1949 the Air Force made a momentous announcement, "It is the policy of the United States Air Force that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Air Force without regard to race, color, religion or national origin." Integration was planned in two phases; the reassignment of black personnel throughout the Air Force worldwide and concurrent changes in the remaining all-black units. Skilled and qualified individuals were to be assigned to white units just like any other officer or airman of similar skills and qualifications.

I finished the last of eighty-five display prints on a quality, archival paper on September, 18, 2007. The next day I went into the dry mounting shop with **Bruce and Jan Warner**, fellow members of the **Columbus Historical Society**, and in four hours we prepared the prints for exhibition. The exhibition was presented at the **Gathering of Mustangs and Legends 2007**, a four day aviation show, September 27-30th, that was a reunion of one hundred P-51 fighter planes, the legendary men and women pilots that flew them to victory during **World War Two** and the surviving Tuskegee Airmen who made Columbus their duty station for three years after that war.

So, thanks to Connie Tracy's request to take an all-expenses unpaid trip through time, I have delighted in renewing the lost legacy of **Lockbourne Air Force Base**, Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the Black commanding officer, Chief Warrant Officer John Brice, who ran a ship of musicians that was so tight, except for Private Ivory Mitchell.

Operation Happiness and Lockbourne Air Force Base became famous all over the world and its people in the show were admirable representatives. Wheels were put in motion to integrate the **U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Military** and eventually alert American life to the talents of the well-trained **Tuskegee Airmen** and America's people of color.

Thank you for listening patiently to my first Kit Kat Club essay.