

Officer Willa Brown: “Aim High”

“During the past three years I have devoted full time to aviation, and for the most part marked progress has been made . . .” Officer Willa Brown wrote in a personal letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (“Letter from Willa Brown”). It was 1941 and Brown’s aviation school, the Coffey School of Aeronautics, had just been certified as a Civil Aeronautics Authority school (Netisha). Despite perpetual race and gender barriers, she exemplified the Tuskegee Airmen’s Guiding Principles and helped America progress towards a more perfect union. With clarity of vision, perseverance, and confidence, Willa Brown played an integral role in the Tuskegee Airmen’s success.

One of the ways in which Willa Brown paved the way for the Tuskegee Airmen was through her sky-high vision—for herself, for her students, and for the nation. Brown’s dreams soared high above the confines of her race and gender, her lofty aspirations a desirable precedent for her students. As the nation’s first black female licensed private pilot and mechanic, her aviation achievements spoke for themselves (Netisha). Brown “aimed high,” her dreams saturating the hearts and minds of the young visionaries she trained, launching their later accomplishments as the famed Tuskegee Airmen (Marzell).

Additionally, Brown “never quit,” her dedication and hard work eventually allowing the Air Corp’s Tuskegee Institute pilot training program to take off (Netisha). Brown labored tirelessly for her students at the Coffey School of Aeronautics in Chicago, which she and her husband had founded to give aspiring black aviators equal opportunity. Despite some discouraging setbacks, Brown’s school was essential to the creation of the Tuskegee Airmen; she herself trained many

of the men who would go on to become cadets and instructors in Alabama (Marzell). Her work was not without plight, yet she persevered courageously, setting a standard—a “never quit” policy—for the Airmen to follow.

Finally, Brown “expected to win,” imparting her own fearless confidence in her pupils. While black soldiers and aviators were forced to take on subordinate roles, denied equal opportunity, and even considered by many to be incapable and cowardly, Brown never allowed herself or her students to surrender to such prejudice, instead pushing forward and anticipating victory (Netisha). Even in the face of segregated, racist America, her tenacity lifted the spirits of her pupils, giving them a sense of purpose and pride. Even in one of the nation’s darkest hours, in the midst of devaluation and indignity, Brown taught her pupils to keep their eyes on a bright horizon, the rising glory of equal opportunity.

By “aiming high,” Brown set goals and achieved them, modeling how hard work fulfills ambitions. By “never quitting,” she faced down obstacles with grit and prepared the runway for the Tuskegee Airmen. By “expecting to win,” she instilled a sense of purpose in her trainees that transcended even their own aviation aspirations—the triumph of a suppressed race and the progress of a nation. America’s renowned Tuskegee Airmen owe much of their success to Officer Willa Brown, a pioneering Tuskegee *Airwoman*.

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