

Black Pioneers

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May 20, 2022

Luther Smith served as a fighter pilot in the 332nd Fighter Group, the unit which would eventually become known as the Tuskegee Airmen. His efforts would pave the way for many others to follow.

Gordon Smith, an Executive Director and Relationship Executive in the Commercial Bank, still vividly remembers the day Barack Obama was inaugurated as the President of the United States of America. He and his father, Luther Smith, attended the ceremony as guests of the newly inaugurated President and were seated just a few feet from where he took his oath of office.

For both men, it was a pivotal moment, a first among firsts as a Black American would become the Commander-in-Chief of the United States. It was a moment Luther never thought he'd see in his lifetime. Here was another Black pioneer, who had beat the odds and blazed a trail for generations to come.

Though Obama's story was unique, Luther knew the chapters well – after all, he played a role putting them together.



Luther Smith conducts pre-flight checks from the cockpit of his P-47 Thunderbolt.

Flight

Luther Smith was born in Des Moines, Iowa on September 27, 1920. As a child, he was playing in an open farm field when he found five dollars.

He might as well have won the lottery.

"My father used that to buy a plane ride for him and his brother," said Gordon. "It was the first time he had been on an airplane and he absolutely loved it. From that moment on, he wanted to become a pilot."

At 13, Luther Smith began pursuing his dream.

"He would walk five miles every day to the airport just to be around airplanes," Gordon said. "He was there so much that the staff offered him a job."

If there's ever an argument for the benefits of on-the-job training, Luther would be a fitting example.

"In 1938 the US Government began the Civilian Pilot Training Program," Gordon said. "My father applied to the program and obtained his pilot's license before the war and was among the first Black American pilots. When he took his final test to get his license, the instructor failed him because he was Black, but the owner of the school knew of my dad and said, 'there's no way Luther Smith could have failed.' He allowed my dad to retake the test with a new instructor and my dad passed the exam."

Luther enrolled in the University of Iowa's engineering program to advance his opportunities of becoming a military pilot, and shortly after, the United States entered the second world war. Luther wanted to do his duty but worried that he wouldn't be allowed to fly.

"My father wanted to be a military aviator but there were no Black military aviators at the time," said Gordon. "Eventually he heard about the Tuskegee experiment, which was a test to see if Black Americans could fly. He immediately dropped out of school and applied to the program."

In 1943, Lt. Luther Henry Smith graduated class 43-E-SE and earned his wings as a U.S. military aviator.



Luther Smith pictured in his dress uniform.

War

The night before he deployed to the European theater, Luther and several fellow aviators decided to catch a movie.

"They were college educated US Military officers in full uniform and had their pilot's wings which would be the equivalent of being an astronaut today," said Gordon. "The theater owner told them they didn't admit Blacks and told them to leave."

Luther was disgusted - he was fighting for a nation that treated him poorly. However, he turned that anger into motivation.

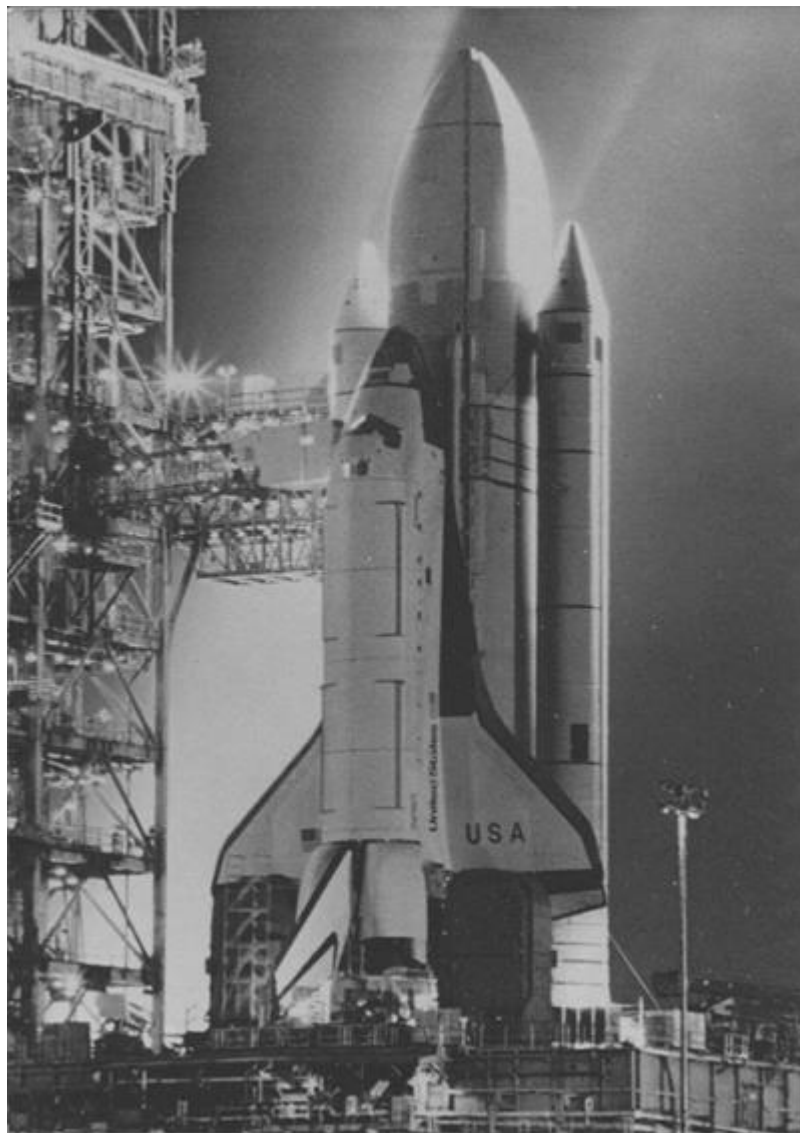
"The Tuskegee Airmen were highly motivated and disciplined because of everything they had to go through," said Gordon. "They were held to higher standards because some people wanted to see them fail, and they were determined to prove the naysayers wrong."

That's exactly what Luther did. During the span of eight months, Luther flew 133 combat missions, an incredible amount by any measure, but for the aviators of the 332nd Fighter Group, the famed Red Tails, it wasn't out of the ordinary.

"They weren't replacing Black pilots," said Gordon. "A tour of duty for a fighter pilot at the time was 50 missions after which you had completed your tour. The number 50 was not coincidental as your odds of survival start to plummet dramatically after having flown in combat more than 50 times. The Tuskegee Airmen fighter pilots often flew well beyond 50 missions."

During his deployment, Luther was credited with shooting down two enemy aircraft in air-to-air combat and 10 more stationary aircraft. On his last mission, Luther destroyed a German munitions train, but the erupting explosion badly damaged his plane which began to spin out of control, and he had to bail out. Injured and captured by the enemy, he learned German to get a better handle on his situation.

"The SS (Schutzstaffel - the secret police of the Nazi party) came to question my father, and they asked him, 'why do you fight for a nation that hates you?'" said Gordon. "Well, my father was indignant. He told them he was an American and that he was proud of what he was doing. He, like so many other Tuskegee Airmen, were fighting for what America could be. They were fighting for what America should be."



Luther Smith would become the first Black American Aerospace engineer for GE's Missile and Space Operations and consult with NASA.

America

After seven months in German captivity, Luther returned to the United States after the British liberated the prisoner of war camp in Austria where he was held. His injuries medically retired him from the military, so he picked up where he left off at the University of Iowa and earned his engineering degree in 1950. At the time, he was a decorated military aviator, war hero, and had a college degree – which few Americans held back then.

My father couldn't get a job with those credentials," said Gordon. "He couldn't even get an interview. He applied to General Electric (GE) and they declined to interview him even though they were openly advertising for engineers. My mom, whom he had just married, reached out to them with a letter asking, 'how is it that this highly decorated veteran and engineering graduate can't get an interview here?'"

The letter reached the desks of senior leaders at GE and soon, Luther became the first Black American aerospace engineer for GE's Missile and Space Operations. Still, Luther had to contend with racism.

"He couldn't stay at the same hotel as other engineers when he traveled for work in the south," said Gordon. "This was well into the 60s. My father had enough. He eventually put his foot down and said, 'if you want GE to do business with you, you're going to have to treat me as an equal or we're leaving.'"

They listened – as did others. Luther would go on to earn a Master's degree, develop two patents, consult with NASA, and support the U.S. Navy's program to build silent submarines. Though muted by racism, his efforts would not go unnoticed, particularly from a prospective young senator from Illinois with new ideas for what America could be.

"When Barack Obama was elected President, he made it a point to invite my dad and the Tuskegee Airmen to be at his inauguration in 2009," said Gordon. "My dad got to meet with him, and you couldn't put in words what it meant for him to see a Black American become the President of the United States."

Luther Smith passed away that same year at the age of 89. Today, Gordon remembers the legacy and the lessons he learned from his father.

"I've been a banker for more than 30 years and we frequently have competitive challenges to try and win deals," said Gordon. "From my father, I inherited drive and the pursuit of opportunities. I think about what he had to go through and how he never let obstacles be a deterrent. The impact he and the Tuskegee Airmen had on civil rights and our nation is tremendous, they were truly inspirational. They achieved so much by overcoming so many obstacles - they were Black pioneers."





Gordon Smith visits the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site to pay tribute to his father and the Tuskegee Airmen.

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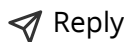
Daphne Williams | 1 Jun 2022, 2:14 PM

WOW! thank you for this



Eric I Haynes | 1 Jun 2022, 12:19 PM

What an amazing story! The accomplishments through all the trials. I thank your father for paving the road for us today. Thank you!



Suzanne M Kimball | 1 Jun 2022, 11:04 AM

Thank you for sharing your father's story. He was a true hero in so many ways. It gives me hope to see how far our nation has come and courage to keep striving for more changes. Thank you~



Marilyn J Lea | 1 Jun 2022, 9:57 AM

This is a fascinating and truly remarkable story. Thank you, and your father, so much Gordon.





Larry S Paul | 1 Jun 2022, 9:27 AM

Truly inspiring! I was privileged to know a Tuskegee airman, Nicholas Neblitt, who was my best friend's father. Interestingly, he also worked for GE but in the Aircraft Engine Group where he ultimately ran the final engine tests. He too felt similar discrimination as his education and aviation credentials were overlooked. My greatest recollection is Mr. Neblitt was never bitter. I try to emulate his grace and positive outlook to this day.

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