

## **"I GOT WINGS"**

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As Told to William A. H. Birnie

From "The People's Voice" July 11, 1942

Reprinted from American Magazine

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"OKAY. That's it!"

That motor sure sounds swell as it roars like one thousand thunderstorms. I swing the whip onto the concrete runway for the take-off. Faster, faster. Hangars flash past. At first its as bumpy as riding in the jalopy with one flat tire. Then, the never-failing miracle, the bumps smooth off. We're in the air. Out of this world. Free.

Upstairs, at 2000 feet, I look around. Below me, the Tuskegee Army Flying School, where nearly 50 colored officers and over 1,000 colored enlisted men are working like industrious ants to make a success of the first Army aviation post for Negroes.

Around me, stretching away to the horizon, the red clay of Alabama, dotted with corn and cotton fields where the Negroes are working. The same fields where their ancestors worked – as slaves. A little knot of people in one field look up at me. A couple of them wave. I feel a catch in my throat.

*My people...*

I'm a Negro, too; one of the pioneer class at Tuskegee. There were 13 of us to begin with, but eight got washed out. That left five, and we all got our wings together. Those bright, silver wings that had never been awarded to any colored men before. Captain Ben Davis Jr, a West Point graduate, and son of Brigadier General Davis, the only Negro to become a general in American history. Lem Custis, who used to be a cop in Hartford, Conn. George Roberts, who worked with the CAA in West Virginia. Mac Ross, ex-inspector in a Dayton Ohio, steel mill. And myself.

A voice crackles in my earphones: "*Lieutenant DeBow, proceed too...*"

As I carry out the assignment, I remember the civilian who stopped me on the street in Montgomery the other day. "You one of those new colored fliers over at Tuskegee?" he asked.

"Yes, sir" I replied proudly.

"Tell me one thing," he said. "What do you boys want to fly for, anyhow?"

If my skin hadn't been black, I don't suppose he'd have asked me. But I've been thinking it over ever since, and I think I've cleared it up in my own mind.

First of all, I'm flying for Uncle Sam. We're in a war for the future and I want no part of the fascist future. Our democracy isn't perfect, but it's the only system that opens the way to perfection. Maybe tomorrow, maybe months from tomorrow, I might be shipped off for combat duty. East or West, I don't care which. To help protect this way of life, a Jap or a German is all the same to me.

I'm flying for Dad and Mom, too. Dad's a porter in a white barbershop in Indianapolis, Ind. He makes \$30 a week, and Mom used to earn \$20 more as a maid in a department store. When I got my commission, I began sending her half my pay on condition she quit working. It took some persuading, but finally she agreed. Both of them gave up comforts and vacations to see me through school. I can't let them down.

Finally, I'm flying for every one of the 12,000,000 Negroes in the United States. I want to prove that we can take a tough job and handle it just as well as a white man. God didn't fit me to be a great educator like Booker T. Washington, or a great scientist like George Washington Carver. But maybe I can fly so that nobody can ever again say, "Oh, Negroes are all right as janitors and handymen, but they can't learn to fly, or fight or be good officers."

I think all of us at Tuskegee feel that way. We've got double duty – to our country and to our race. That goes not only for the fliers, but for the ground crews, and doctors, and executive officers, and radio specialists, and supply men. Everybody. We've all got a job to do – and we're going to see it through.

I guess that's why there isn't much fooling in our outfit. Take the time Mac Ross got in trouble, a few weeks after we got our wings. He and I were flying tight formation at 6,000 feet. Wing tips six inches apart. Suddenly I noticed smoke whispering out of his engine. Half a second later Mac notices it too. He signaled me, "Loosen up the formation." I moved away and radioed the field. That smoke was a black cloud now.

"Jump, you fool, *jump*," I breathed. But Mac stuck with his ship. 5,000 feet. 4,000 feet. He was fighting to get back to the field, to bring the ship in. "You'll kill yourself," I thought. Finally, at 3,000 feet, he jumped. About time. I dived alongside him, and radioed the field where he landed. They picked him up 20 minutes later. He was trudging along a dirt road, the silk over his shoulder and a scratch on his hand, not from the jump, but from climbing over a barbed-wire fence.

But Mac was worried sick that night. "Maybe I did something wrong," he kept saying. "Maybe I could have brought her in."

I tried to cheer him up. "Listen, pal," I said. "Do you realize you're the first colored member of the caterpillar club?" But all the time I knew what he was thinking. "*I've wrecked a ship worth thousands of dollars. Maybe they'll start saying that Negroes can't fly.*"

But the official report put him away out in the clear. "100 percent material failure."

That meant it wasn't his fault at all. He'd done everything possible, and jumped when he should. There's no advantage in losing a pilot as well as a plane. We went to Montgomery to celebrate, Mac and Roberts and Custis and I.

The radio again: "*Lieutenant DeBow come in for landing...*"

Probably to pick up a student for instruction. The class after us graduated three colored lieutenants, but since then the number of aviation cadets has jumped and the plan now is to graduate a sizable class every month. They'll be assigned to Pursuit Squadrons, ready for action any time, any place.

The student turns out to be a serious-faced boy from the deep South. A farm kid who's never

been north of the Mason-Dixon. We go upstairs, and I shout to him through the gossports, "Take over. Feel 'er out." He starts working the controls. The ship sways, as a ship always sways when a beginner handles it. But I lean back in my cockpit, half alert, half relaxed. I study the back of his helmet and wonder if he feels that flying for the Army is the realization of a wild, fantastic, impossible dream.

The way it is with me...

We lived in the colored district in Indianapolis, where I was born February 13, 1918. One afternoon, when I was six, Mom gave me a dime to go to the movies. I went up to the box office and stood on tiptoes to slip my dime under the glass window. The girl inside didn't even touch my money. "One ticket please," I said.

She glanced down at me. "No Negroes." she said casually but not unkindly. "This is a white theater." I reached out, clutched the dime in my fist, and raced home.

I wasn't upset, or scared, or heartbroken, or anything like that. Just bewildered. Of course, I'd noticed that some people had white skins and some people has black. But that hadn't seemed any more important to me than wearing a red necktie or a blue one. Color didn't have anything to do with a mans' soul, or with his humanity.

But Mom set me straight. I can see her face as she explained that the world I knew was really divided into two separate worlds: one for white folks: one for us, the Negroes. That knowledge didn't hurt then. I just accepted it as one of the immutable phenomena of the universe like cold weather and hard work.

We all worked pretty hard at home. When I was seven I started delivering newspapers. In high school I worked as delivery boy for a drugstore (hours 4pm to midnight) and later as a janitor and general utility man at a shoe store. Studies came fairly easy, and I spent an abnormal amount of time in class and out, daydreaming. Mostly about flying.

I can't remember how it started. But every time I watched a plane until it disappeared behind a

cloud or tenement, I felt an ache in the pit of my stomach. I guess flying was a symbol of liberation, emancipation from the crowded streets and crowded rooms. I turned out innumerable model planes, a few of which actually flew. I pictured myself setting out on the transcontinental hops and smashing speed records.

Oh, they were grand, heartening dreams. But deep inside I knew all the time that they were just dreams. I knew I had about as much chance of becoming a flier as I had of buying the department store where Mom worked. It cost a pile of dough to learn to fly didn't it? Besides, Negroes didn't become aviators. They became elevator operators, and janitors, and porters like Dad. I knew all that with my head, but I kept my dreams in my heart.

One spring I earned enough money selling soap to go to a Boy Scout camp just north of Indianapolis

Across the river stood Fort Benjamin Harrison. As I watched the soldiers, I acquired another dream, I'd be a soldier. One day I went down to the

Federal Building

in

Indianapolis

and drank in ersatz courage by staring for twenty minutes at the big recruiting posters outside: "Enlist Now," "Uncle Sam Needs You."

That You meant me, didn't it?

I went in and said I wanted to enlist. The sergeant on duty shook his head. "Quota's all filled." Half a dozen times I tried again, but I always got the same answer. There just wasn't room for Negroes. I tried to forget about the army.

After I was graduated from high school I entered Indiana University. Dad and Mom sent me \$30 a month and I earned the rest of my expenses by working in the extension office and washing dishes at the Kappa Sigma fraternity for white boys. Dad was set on my becoming a doctor. "White or colored a doc can always make a good living," he used to say. But two years of pre-medicine convinced me I wasn't cut out for the medical profession. Besides, I wanted to go to a colored school where no doors would be closed to me. So I transferred to Hampton Institute in Virginia and switched to a business course.

In the fall of my second year at Hampton I couldn't believe my ears when I heard the news. The CAA was starting a unit there. The government was providing the money to teach 20 Negroes to fly. Maybe that meant me! Three hundred of us signed up overnight. A lot were eliminated by the touch physical examination and others because their parents wouldn't give their consent. Mom doesn't worry about my flying. She says that a fellow like me will always get along somehow. But Dad's a skeptic. In every letter he still tells me to be careful. But they both told me to go ahead, and I was among the lucky 20 who were picked.

Naturally, I was in 17<sup>th</sup> heaven – until I took my first flight. That training ship looked mighty flimsy. When my instructor, Charles Barclay, took me up for an observation ride, I felt as if I had been cheating myself all my life. Where was that sense of liberation I'd been dreaming about? All I felt was anxiety, and a mighty sense of relief when we touched ground.

"Like it?" asked Barclay,

"Not particularly, sir" I replied, my face lending emphasis to my words.

He looked at me keenly, "Maybe you haven't got what it takes."

That night, sleep would not come. Was I going to miff this chance? Didn't I, after all, have what it takes?

Next flight, I fought to relax. That sounds funny, but its exactly what I did. Fought with every muscle in my body and every cell in my brain. Then it happened. After we'd been up five minutes, suddenly, incredibly, I didn't have to fight anymore. "Feel 'er out" Barclay shouted. Tentatively I put my hand on the controls, the way Mom used to put her hand on the stove to see whether it was hot enough. The ship tilted to one side. A shiver shot through my spine, a shiver of exhilaration. That ship was tilting because I was making it tilt. Man alive, I was flying!

The rest of my instruction is a jumbled memory. Orders. Mistakes. Practice. Struggling to feel one with a fuselage and propeller. Finally, after 8 hours and 3 minutes of dual flying, Barclay tells me to take it up alone. My first solo. The big test. My heart is thumping. But I get off okay. I'm concentrating too hard to feel anything. On the way in, I turn out to be ground-shy. Twice I overshoot the field and have to circle around again. Third time, I mutter. "Easy boy, easy does it." and I come in for a bump landing. But I'd flown alone. Nobody could ever take that away from me.

By the end of the semester, I'd picked up the 35 solo hours for my private pilot's license. But I'd also picked up something else – the flying bug. A bad case, too. All thoughts of business were banished. I was going to fly – and keep on flying. I hadn't been fooling myself as a kid, after all.

When I got home that summer I told my folks I wasn't going back to school. I had it all figured out. During the next 12 months I had to get in 15 hours of flying to keep my precious license. That government wasn't paying the bills any more. And 15 hours at \$7 an hour takes \$105. I couldn't swing that on top of my school expenses.

Dad wanted to give me \$200 he saved up. "If you go back to school," he said, "I'll give you another \$400". Not all at once, naturally, but a little each week." I know what that meant – Dad and Mom doing without things. I'd taken their money long enough. Finally I got them to see my point of view, even persuaded them to spend the \$200 on themselves. They took their first vacation in years.

My idea was to get a job and spend all the money I could save on flying. But that wasn't so easy as it sounds. I got the job, all right – bookkeeping for a chain of colored drugstores. But I couldn't get a plane. There were plenty of them for rent, but not for Charles H. DeBow, Negro.

I got another idea. Maybe, now that I was a flier, I could get into the army. I returned to the Federal Building, this time with plenty of confidence. Now I had something to offer. I was a licensed pilot.

But the answer was the same old one: "No openings for Negroes in the Air Force."

“But I cant have the blanks? I’d like to fill them out and send them in anyhow.”

“Nope, that’d just be a waste of time.”

Eventually, though, I got the blanks, after a lawyer friend applied to Judge William Hastle, now civilian aide to the Secretary of War. On January 1, 1941, I sent them in to the War Department.

Next day I moved to Chicago. There I found plenty of colored fields where I could rent a plane. I landed a job as oven operator in a steel manufacturing factory. It was hot work, but it paid \$30 a week, and that meant I could buy those flying hours and keep my license. I began haunting the fields, going up every Saturday and Sunday when I had scraped together seven bucks. Then, one lunch hour, I read in the paper that the War Department had just announced that Negro applications would be accepted for the Air Force. That night I wrote a letter and breathed a prayer over it. I had already sent in my papers... I had flying training... Couldn’t I expect an appointment?

When the answer came, my hands shook as I tore open the envelope. The letter was brief, formal, thrilling. I would be appointed to the first class of Negro cadets! The end of a long trail, or rather the beginning. From March to July I waited, with my fingers crossed. Then the appointment came through, and I reported at Tuskegee.

A year ago, when I arrived, that field wasn’t much more than a gleam in some army architect’s eye. But it took shape fast. Under my eyes, 1,600 rolling acres of farm and woods and swamps were transformed into a modern airport that can accommodate anything that men can fly – including Flying Fortresses. Hundreds of barracks, hangars, mess halls and administrative buildings went up. To date, Tuskegee field has cost the government nearly four million dollars, but the result is as fine an airport as you’ll find anywhere in the world.

We 13 pioneers were a grimfaced lot. If anybody was looking for thrills or high adventure, he learned better. The work was plenty tough, right from the beginning. Perhaps we made it tougher for ourselves because we realized our responsibility to the thousands of Negroes across the country who were counting on us to come through.

The pre-flight course lasted five weeks. From 5 am to 10 pm, we drilled and studied – first aid, radio, codes, aircraft identification, military law, courtesy, army organization. Primary flight training was under the supervision of the army, but the actual instructors were colored civilians trained under the CAA. Those PT-13's were a lot more powerful than anything I'd ever flown before – 200 horsepower, cruising speed of 90 miles an hour.

Every washout was a tragedy to the victim. But it was no fun for the rest of us, either. I was standing by the runway when one pal came down from a check ride. His face was ashen as he climbed out of the plane. I turned away because I knew he wouldn't feel like talking. That night, at supper, he didn't say a word. Later, when he was packing, he told me he was going home to enlist. "Maybe," he said, forcing a smile, "maybe I can get back here in ground work, or something." I'm still looking for him.

In November, two or three weeks before Pearl Harbor, the six of us who had survived Primary moved on to Basic Training. Big Vultee BT-13's, with 400 horsepower, 130 miles-an-hour cruising speed, and plenty of new problems.

Now, our instructors were white flying officers who had volunteered for the job. Not one had been assigned against his will. You can imagine what that meant to us. They saw to it that we maintained military discipline. We just weren't taking chances. For every one of us the bottom would drop out of the world if we got washed out.

We were graduated to Advanced Training in January of this year. The last lap. Even the civilian instructors who had taught us back in Primary began looking at us enviously. "Say, Charlie, how does it feel to fly those big ships?" my old instructor asked me when I met him on the street in Tuskegee. It dawned on me that no colored men before us had flown Uncle Sam's fighters. Probably no colored man, anywhere, had flown such costly planes. It made me feel proud, and humble, and determined.

Those ships were something – those North American AT-6A's with their 600 horsepower, 160 mile-an-hour cruising speed, and 30-caliber machine guns. We spent four days at Eglin Field in Florida shooting at ground and towed targets. We all qualified, and we had the additional satisfaction of setting a better record than the squad of British cadets who had left just before

we arrived. We practiced night formation flying, with our wing tips 6 inches apart.

Today, as I write this, we're back at Tuskegee, learning advanced combat tactics, and helping teaching the boys following in our footsteps. Helping them get their wings, helping them make their dreams come true. I don't know what our next orders will be. But, whatever they are, they'll find us ready and willing.

Personally – just personally – I hope I get a chance to tangle with a jap or a nazi. Soon I'd like to be the first Negro to bag one. I've waited a long time.