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Philip S. Hart
University of Massachusetts Boston

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Telling the Story of the Early Black Aviators

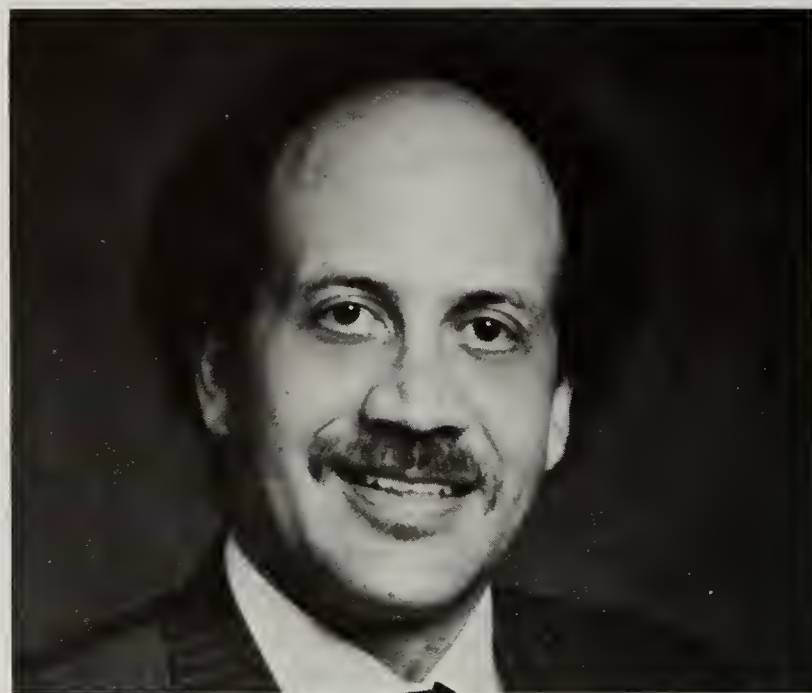
by
Philip S. Hart

The story of America's early black aviators from the 1920s and 1930s has been one of the neglected themes in American aviation history. My interest in this topic began with research into family history. My mother's uncle, J. Herman Banning, was a pioneer black aviator during this nation's Golden Age of Aviation. I remember my mother, aunt, and grandmother talking about J. Herman Banning back when I was little, and in my teenage years I tried to find out more than I had learned from these family stories and photographs, but it was difficult for me to locate any information about Banning or any of his peers from the usual sources.

As I continued my education I continued to pursue the history of Banning and other blacks from this era, but the process proved to be very discouraging. It was not until the late 1970s, when I found out that the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum was thinking of organizing an exhibit on America's early black aviators, that I became optimistic.

When the National Air and Space Museum, under the guidance of curators Von Hardesty and Dom Pisano, began their search, they did not believe that enough material existed to mount a permanent exhibit. Their plan was to mount a temporary exhibit. However, when the news that Air and Space was planning such an exhibit became public, people like myself, with an interest in black aviators, came out of the woodwork. In short, the Museum was able to collect enough material to mount a permanent exhibit, and the "Black Wings Exhibit" opened in September of 1982 to critical acclaim. There was considerable media coverage from around the globe. The exhibit consisted of three sections: The Pioneers, World War II and the Tuskegee Airmen, and Blacks in Modern Aviation. I served as an adviser for the Pioneers section, contributing photographs and

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other memorabilia from the 1920s and 1930s related to Banning and his peers. The exhibit has proven so popular that three traveling exhibits were put together by the Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibit Service to tour the country.

One of the things my research revealed about the pioneers was that there had been no visual documentation of their contributions to American aviation history before the Air and Space Museum exhibit. The fact that the exhibit is on permanent display at the Museum is no small feat, as the Air and Space Museum is the most popular museum in the world. But there was a need for a film to tell the story of America's black aviation pioneers. Having a background as a filmmaker as well as a scholar, I decided to correct this oversight, and I put together a 60-minute documentary on America's early black aviators for television.

Using my own funds as seed money, I was able to secure a research and development grant from the California Council for the Humanities. These funds were matched by UCLA, where I was spending part of my sabbatical year. Los Angeles was one of two centers of black aviation activity during the 1920s—Chicago was the other—so my year in Los Angeles allowed me to further my research into this topic.

Many of the key individuals, and family members of key individuals, reside in the Los Angeles area. I was able to locate several of them in and around Los Angeles. After making contact with them I would schedule a time to meet with them and talk about their experiences from 50 and 60 years ago. I would also review their photographic collections and other memorabilia they had preserved. Generally, I found these individuals to be very eager to assist me and very willing to share their memories and photographs. I also found a bitterness among them. They felt that they had made a contribution to American aviation history and that their contribution had been ignored.

On my second visit I would bring an audio tape in order to conduct an interview. For the most part,

even though we are talking about people in their late 70s and early 80s, I found them to be alert and lively. Their level of excitement and energy helped lift me up. They knew that I intended to produce a television documentary, and they wanted to assure themselves that it would be accurate and honest.



Courtesy of Philip S. Hart

Thomas C. Allen and J. Herman Banning after completing first transcontinental flight by black aviators, October 1932

They developed a trust in me, particularly since they realized that I was a descendant of probably the most famous black flyer of this era, a person who was referred to in the black press as “the suntanned Lindbergh.” However, it was clear that they harbored a bitterness toward aviation historians, television producers, and society in general for ignoring them and their history.

Before the exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute, before my television documentary “Flyers In Search of a Dream,” many people knew about the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II. But few were aware that black pilots were making transcontinental flights and performing in air shows in the 1920s and 1930s. The documentary chronicles black pilots based in two major cities—Los Angeles and Chicago. Seven notable figures emerged in those early years.¹

Bessie Coleman was the first black person licensed to fly. She trained in France and received her license there in 1922, as there was greater tolerance in France for black aviators than there was in the United States. Afterward she barnstormed for four years in the United States before dying in a 1926 crash at the age of 33.

James Herman Banning spent two years at Iowa State College before traveling to Chicago to enroll in aviation school. Racial barriers prohibited him from getting training in Chicago, so he returned to Iowa where he trained with a retired army officer

and gained his license in 1926. He barnstormed for three years before joining the Los Angeles-based Bessie Coleman Aero Club in 1929. Less than a year after making the first transcontinental flight by a black (1932), Banning died at age 32 in a San Diego crash.

William J. Powell organized the Coleman Aero Club to draw blacks into aviation. In 1934 he published the book *Black Wings*, urging blacks to “fill the air with black wings” as a way of elevating black status, thinking that by conquering this relatively new field blacks might gain more standing in the wider American society.

Marie Dickerson Coker, now over 80 years old, was the only female pilot in the five member “Blackbirds” precision and stunt flying team of Los Angeles. This group performed throughout the early 1930s.

Harold Hurd, now 75 years of age, flew in the mid-1930s with the Chicago-based group. He had the distinction of graduating with the first group of black trainees from the Curtis-Wright Aeronautical School. After earning his pilot’s license from Chicago’s Harlem Airport, Hurd flew there before entering the U.S. Army Air Force as a sergeant major, training black pilots at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Cornelius Coffey, one of the oldest surviving black aviators at 85, was another Chicago-based pilot, and he established the Coffey School of Aeronautics to promote black participation in aviation. He also organized the first black airfield in Robbins, Illinois, where he trained pilots.



Courtesy of Philip S. Hart

Willa Brown (right), early aviator and Director of Public Relations for the Coffey School

Hurbert Julian, a flamboyant character who called himself the "Black Eagle," was one of the more famous black pilots of the 1930s. He courted publicity through his stunt flying and his unusual promotion antics, once parachuting into Harlem clothed in a brightly-colored cape.

In 1939 black airmen were admitted into the Civilian Pilot Training Program, which provided a contingent of pilots for wartime emergencies. Gradually training was becoming more available to blacks, with six black colleges and two flying schools offering flight instructions.

In 1941 Congress created the all-black 99th Fighter Squadron, and Tuskegee Army Air Field was opened soon thereafter with the first black military pilots being admitted to training in July of 1941. The 332nd Fighter Group, flying over Italy, Germany, and Eastern Europe, had the mission of escorting air force bombers. This unit became a source of pride for all black pilots, as they maintained a perfect record for safe escort.

As for funding my project, after completing the script with research and development funding from the California Council and UCLA, I received a matching grant from the Council for production and post-production. UCLA provided a partial match for the Council funds. The University of Massachusetts also provided a portion of the match. However, despite all my efforts, I was unable to secure any corporate support for this project. The negative experience of dealing with corporate America is probably the most distasteful aspect of this particular project for me. I found a complete lack of interest in funding a project that depicted blacks playing a pro-active role in a technical field.

I approached airline companies, aircraft manufacturers, and other corporate underwriters with a his-

tory of supporting public television programming. There was no corporation that said the idea was no good, but no corporation provided a grant to help bring this neglected story of blacks participating in a technical field to television. In addition, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting turned down three requests for funding.

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I ended up using a considerable amount of my own money to complete the 60-minute documentary. The final budget for this film was in the \$250,000-\$300,000 range. The underwriters were the California Council for the Humanities, UCLA, WGBH Education Foundation, University of Massachusetts, the non-profit Community Development Corporation of Boston, with my funds filling in the cracks whenever a shortfall occurred. The average 60-minute documentary on public television costs in the \$400,000-\$500,000 range. It is very unusual to have a program air on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) without corporate support.

American television, whether commercial or public, has aired next to nothing in which blacks are seen playing a pro-active role relative to a technical field such as aviation. It is no wonder that black youngsters do not strive to move into the technical fields in our society. Research indicates that black youngsters in particular, and black households in general, are among the heaviest television viewers. For the most part, these television viewers have seen virtually nothing on American television that depicts



Class in aeronautical training at Curtis-Wright Flying School, Chicago, January 1932

Courtesy of Philip S. Hart

black people in technical fields. Despite these odds, I was able to bring this story to public television. The film is now being distributed in the United States and Canada by PBS Video.

“Flyers In Search of a Dream” remains a rare commodity. It tells the story of black men and women playing a role in aviation during the early years

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of this burgeoning industry. I would like to see more such programs on television. However, I am discouraged by the response of corporate America, which seems more willing to reinforce prevailing stereotypes than to break new ground. The story of America’s early black aviators is an old story. However, it is actually a new story as far as most Americans are concerned.

I have received mostly positive feedback from the pioneers and from the general audience. The pro-

gram received very good ratings both in Boston and in cities around the country. The film is now in the Smithsonian archives, as well as the television and film archives at UCLA. I have been able to bring the story of my uncle and his peers to a broad worldwide audience. They are at last receiving the kind of recognition they should have received years ago.

I challenge corporate America and American television to pay more attention to depicting blacks in pro-active roles relative to technical fields. There is a big void in this area. There is a big piece missing in American history in this regard. My work helped fill one big hole. I hope it can stimulate others to identify and fill other holes. But in order to do this effectively, resources and a commitment from the broader community are essential.

References

¹Malmsbury, J. (1986, Spring). Flying Free: Early Black Aviators Break the Color Barrier. *Summit Magazine*. This article is based on an interview with Philip S. Hart.

Philip S. Hart is a professor of Sociology and Public Service at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. This article is the revised version of a presentation made at the Annual Meeting of the Oral History Association, October 13-16, 1988.