

***Tuskegee Airman
The Biography of
Charles E. McGee***

**Air Force Fighter Combat
Record Holder**

**By
Charlene E. McGee Smith, Ph.D.**

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For Mom,
who kept the home fire burning,
and Bill,
who completes me.

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The final outcome, this biography of Charles E. McGee, distinguished aviator and American patriot, is possible because of all who assisted. Through their time and effort, Dad's example will reach and inspire a wider circle of people, enriching them as it has those of us fortunate enough to have known and journeyed with him.

Abbreviations

ACSS	Air Command and Staff School	POW	Prisoner of war
ADC	Air Defense Command	ROK	Republic of Korea
AFB	Air Force Base	RON	Remain overnight
AFCS	Air Force Communications Service	ROTC	Reserve Officers Training Corps
AME	African Methodist Episcopal	RSVN	Republic of South Vietnam
APO	Army post office	SAC	Strategic Air Command
BOQ	Bachelor officer's quarters	SOF	Supervisor of flying
BX	Base exchange	TAAF	Tuskegee Army Air Field
CADF	Central Air Defense Force	TAI	Tuskegee Airmen, Incorporated
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps	TDY	Temporary duty assignment
C.O.	Commanding officer	TRS	Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron
D.C.	District of Columbia	U. of I.	University of Illinois
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross	UN	United Nations
FAA	Federal Aviation Authority	U.S.	United States
FIS	Fighter Interceptor Squadron	USA	United States of America
GI	Government issue	USAEUR	United States Army Europe
K.U.	Kansas University	USAF	United States Air Force
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People	USAFE	United States Air Force Europe
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization	USO	United Service Organizations
O.U.	Ohio University	VD	Venereal disease
PCS	Permanent change of station	VIP	Very Important Person
Ph.D.	Doctor of Philosophy	V-J Day	Victory over Japan Day
		WW II	World War II

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know that a can of beans or soup often sufficed for a meal or late night snack.

Charles spent the year before he graduated from DuSable High School in the spring of 1938 in a spartan fashion. He made use of his time studying and as a result graduated ninth in a class of four hundred and thirty-six students. After high school, Charles planned to work for a year to make money for college. Luvinia, through connections she had, was able to get him a job with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). In late 1938 and early 1939, Charles worked on various road and farm projects with 2664 Company in Mt. Carroll in northern Illinois and saved his money. The Corps was almost like a military camp. You got a uniform and a paycheck while you learned a skill and served the country. In Mt. Carroll, Charles worked with engineers, handling the transit and laying out contours. During that time he developed an interest in civil engineering which followed him into college.

While Charles was hard at work with Roosevelt's CCC Program, a bitter Adolph Hitler was leading the Nazi Party on a steady course of revenge for the harsh treatment Germans encountered after losing World War I. By September of that year, Hitler had taken control of Czechoslovakia, and with the help of Joseph Stalin, the Germans and Russians captured Poland. Polish Jews were being exterminated. Britain declared war on Germany and began sending troops into France. Hitler had his eyes on Norway to secure a foothold from which to launch an attack against Britain.

Rumblings of the war going on in Europe were starting to be heard in the U.S., but Charles and other young men his age were vaguely aware of them. For the most part they were more absorbed with recovering from the depression and getting on with life in this country. The trouble abroad was too distant to have any real bearing on a young black man working to get into college.

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"Even though things were building up in late '39, there was no emphasis on the war until later when the draft started in 1940."

Charles' thoughts had not yet turned skyward to imagine adventures there. Though they would become his heroes, he was unaware of Bessie Coleman's determination to fly, which led her to France when no flying school in this country would admit a black woman, and Charles Alfred Anderson's record as the first black to complete a transcontinental flight. He did not know of unprecedented advances made in aviation in the 1930s or that 125 black Americans held pilot licenses in 1939. In fact, nothing in his childhood or early experiences foretold what was to come. No memories of crop dusters over the sugar cane fields or stunt fliers in newsreels at the cinema. As he packed up his few belongings, took his savings and headed for Champaign-Urbana and his first year at the University of Illinois, his greatest passions in life had not yet been revealed.

II: College Years

1940-1942

- In 1940, Congress passed a law requiring all males between 21 and 35 to register for military service.
- President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in companies doing business with the government and formed the Fair Employment Practice Committee.
- Against the wishes of the War Department, the U.S. Congress, bowing to pressure from Negro leaders and media, activated the first all-black Fighter Squadron at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama.
- On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed and the United States declared war on Japan.
- Allied forces fought Italian and German forces in Northern Africa in 1942.

Black students at the University of Illinois in 1940 were few and far between. There was no housing for them on campus so most, not being locals, had to find rooms in Champaign's North End, home to the majority of the Negro population. Charles took up residence with the Brown family who lived on the corner of 6th and White Street. At first, his "room" was in the basement in a finished space by the furnace, but soon after he moved up to the second floor room with an outside entrance added to accommodate a boarder. He had a place to stay, along with his own shelf in the Browns' ice box: the basic necessities, once he provided the food.

A new engineering student on campus, he soon was introduced to a small group of fellow classmates in similar circumstances, who left the black neighborhood to cross town to the

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white university, a trek that set them apart from most who lived in the North End. Bonds developed as they shared universal college experiences, from study and intellectual debates to social activities and romance.

Though Charles' head was deep in the books, Frances Edwina Nelson was able to turn it. He never forgot the first time he saw her. She was among friends who had gathered on the college green known as the Quad. A tall, brown-skinned beauty with long legs, long hair and penetrating dark eyes, she made quite an impression.

To his great disappointment, those unforgettable eyes did not look his direction and he didn't even manage an introduction.

The next time Charles saw Frances was following Sunday school services several weeks later. Shortly after coming to Champaign, Charles had joined Bethel AME Church continuing to practice his family's African Methodist faith. Frances and her immediate family were members of Salem Baptist Church which was one block east of Bethel. In time honored tradition, young people would gather after services in the block between these prominent pillars of the black community. A weekly ritual, the purpose was to see and be seen before parents whisked their sons and daughters away. On one of these occasions, Charles maneuvered his way over and managed an introduction to Frances, but by her account she did not find the meeting memorable. She was enamored with another young man, Welton "Ike" Taylor, who with her held the campus title for king and queen of jitterbug.

"She had her eye on Ike, so she didn't remember our first meeting."

Frances' family had standing in the Champaign-Urbana community. Her father, Franklin Joseph Nelson, had been a successful businessman and land owner, who left his widow Nellie Carter Nelson (Momma Nellie) and their two children, Leonard and Frances, well provided for after his death in 1935.

Among the land holdings he left his heirs was the large family home at 607 N. Hickory Street, which still had the attached general store Franklin operated for decades. The home served as a boarding house for permanent residents as well as transient visitors. Charles learned Frances was living at home while attending the University. Focusing on the business of being a student, he stayed in the background and waited for her jitterbug partner to fade from the scene.

Living in a relatively small and close knit community had its advantages. Before long their paths crossed again. Not all the Nelsons were Baptists. Frances had a older half brother, Cecil, who was born to Franklin and his first wife. Cecil Nelson and wife Carrie were members of Bethel AME, a circumstance which worked in Charles' favor when they invited Momma Nellie to attend a Sunday afternoon program and she brought Frances along. During the program, a Tom Thumb wedding was planned for the following Sunday afternoon. By a stroke of fate, Charles and Frances were chosen to play the bride and groom. Charles allowed himself the luxury of imagining he was the reason she agreed to participate. At that affair they became acquainted.

No one suspected the Tom Thumb Wedding was a harbinger of things to come.

Life at the U. of I. was a great adventure for Charles his first semester. The discipline that got him through high school was being challenged on a new level. It was a time to apply himself to his studies. No matter what lay ahead, Charles knew education was the path to personal growth and scholarly pursuits the key to professional success.

Another goal of his was to be a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity and to do that he had to make good grades. The fact his dad and uncle were Alphas may have influenced him, but beyond that, Charles liked the things the fraternity stood for. The fraternity motto summarized it: "First of all, servants of all, we shall transcend all."

The "Big Brothers" on campus were a principled, studious bunch which also appealed to Charles. Some members like Dunbar McLaurin were graduate students, a rare occurrence for young black men of the era. The Alphas had a house near the campus which was another attraction. Living there would eliminate the long walk from the North End. Charles along with six other Alpha aspirants joined the line of pledges.

The road to brotherhood had its own obstacles. They were set intentionally to test the mettle of Sphinxmen, the name given to Alpha pledges. Entry was the objective, pledging was the pathway, and hazing was the norm. No matter how smart and savvy Sphinxmen were in other settings, when "Big Brother" was around, there was no questioning his authority.

The inferior status of pledges subjected them to various demands they had to carry out on the spot.

"Recite *Invictus*."

"Recite *If*."

Being prepared to perform more "erudite" orders was essential, but not all commands were so scholarly.

"Count all the bricks in the north wall of Huff Gym!"

"Yes, Big Brother! No, Big Brother! And no excuse, Big Brother!" were replies expected from the pledges.

"Drop and give me twenty (push ups)" and "assume the position" (paddles were not merely ornamental) were frequent commands from the already inducted Alpha Men.

All and all, the hazing by Tau Chapter was not as vicious or extreme as some Greek organizations. The pledging was more directed toward discipline, bonding, and ultimately loyalty among brothers. The common objective was worthy. (Ironically, aspects of pledging were not unlike military training imposed for many of the same reasons.)

By second semester, Charles had ended his days as a pledge. He passed the tests, made the grades and "crossed the burning sands," becoming an Alpha Man.

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Charles knew Frances loved to dance and despite the strict rules laid down by Momma Nellie, she managed to stop by the Kappa Alpha Psi House to indulge this passion as often as possible. Unlike the Alphas, the Kappas were known for their open parties and Charles envied them for no other reason than her visits. At the Kappa House, Frances was a regular in the "enter at your own risk" room reserved for the most daring and accomplished jitterbugs. Not in her league on the dance floor, he watched, stepped in on slow dances and bided his time.

When the draft started in 1940, Charles received his draft card from Gary, Indiana. At the time, college students weren't being called.

"I always remember I had a bicycle at Dad's place in Gary and I don't remember the number...might have been something like 1709, but the license of my bicycle and the draft card number were exactly the same."

He was struck by the coincidence.

Charles, working hard as an engineering major, was also enrolled in ROTC and a member of Pershing Rifles, an elite drill team. Academic rigors coupled with social distractions to take their toll, and second semester Charles' grades began to suffer. At the same time his funds were dwindling. Summer employment was essential for him to have enough cash to return to school the following year. The answer to his financial woes lay in the steel mills of Gary, Indiana.

On July 19, 1941, as 21 year old Charles toiled in the mills, thirteen young Negro men gathered on the campus of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, to form the first class of black pilot trainees for the Army Air Corps.

In the mills of the Carnegie Illinois Steel Company, Charles pulled the graveyard shift on a construction crew. Along with other blacks who were fortunate enough to find employment in the steel industry, his assignments were the menial, back breaking tasks of running concrete for the furnaces or mopping

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up the foundry buildings, but the pay was more than most other jobs and therefore a necessary means to the desired end.

Occasionally, after a long evening on the job, Charles mustered the energy to go into Chicago to enjoy night life the city offered. The early morning bus ride back and precious few hours of sleep before his next shift were deterrents to keep him from making it a regular habit. When he let his mind wonder, it consistently settled on a young woman enjoying less arduous summer days in Champaign, but his budget permitted no more than daydreams. So he applied himself to work and hoped his absence would not provide an unfair advantage to rivals for Frances' affection. Short term sacrifice for long term gain! It was a principle already ingrained in his philosophy.

The war in Europe would not be fended off by aspirations of higher education or thoughts of budding love. In response to increasing concern about events overseas, the draft was reaching into the sanctuary of the college classroom. In the beginning it was easy to resist the notion he would become involved, especially before finishing school. That was no longer the case.

Not long after returning to campus in the fall of 1941, Charles was between classes heading south from Wesley Foundation to the Chemistry Building. He spotted Frances walking toward Green Street. They spoke briefly as their paths crossed. After taking a few steps, Charles turned hoping to get another glimpse of her. To his delight, she had done the same and was looking back too. Their eyes met, she smiled and, in that brief exchange, doubt evaporated and the mystical dye was cast.

Afterward, they spent time together at church and Frances consented when he asked to walk her home from classes. From then they were together whenever possible. Without a lot of money, "library dates" were frequent. Charles credited these with getting him back on track academically. He had changed his major to Life Sciences and was making the Dean's List. Nevertheless, it was a struggle to stay in school. Tuition and

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housing were a big expenses and after they were taken care of he was lucky to have a nickel to buy an apple. To earn money for food, he bussed dishes at one of the fraternity houses and the Champaign Country Club.

By the end of the semester just about everyone knew of someone who had been drafted. Charles' father had served as a commissioned officer and chaplain with the infantry in France during World War I. He spoke enough about his experience to paint a vivid picture of life as a ground soldier in combat and it was grim. Yet what option did Charles have? If called upon, he knew he would have to slosh through muddy woods and fields and endure bitter cold while living in uncomfortable encampments and fighting from foxholes. The thought was more than a little unsettling. Though he began to wonder, he didn't know what other choice he had.

On December 7, 1941 Charles was visiting his father and anticipating a quiet 22nd birthday. At 4:00pm, while riding with members of the Coleridge Taylor Glee Club from Gary to a church in South Chicago for an evening vespers program, he heard numbing news coming across the radio.

"Today at 7:50 am, Pacific time, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor...."

The United States declared war against Japan. While the glee club went on with the show that night, the year ahead was suddenly filled with uncertainty and Charles knew that one way or another, we were going to be involved in war.

Back together on campus, he and Frances knew his call to service was just a matter of time. Each day was precious and tomorrow offered no promises, only the hope of being together. They started going steady. Day by day, life went on and Charles continued school and work. In the meantime, Lewis Sr., Lewis Jr. and Ruth, responding to the build up of armed forces, volunteered for the military service.

Early in 1942, as Charles contemplated his fate, news of a possible alternative began to circulate around campus. Accord-

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ing to the grapevine, colored soldiers would be taught to fly at Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois, just north of Champaign. (As it turned out, non-flying support personnel in communications, engineering, armament and mechanics were being trained at Chanute Field and pilot training was at a remote training school near Tuskegee, Alabama. There, the wife of the President of the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt, had flown with a black pilot, Charles Alfred "Chief" Anderson of the Civilian Pilot Training Program. She was visiting Tuskegee Institute to look into research being done on infantile paralysis, her husband's illness. To the shock of her secret service agents, the flight with "Chief" was an impromptu decision she made. The highly publicized event helped counter skepticism about the ability of blacks to fly and changed lives and history. Mrs. Roosevelt subsequently was reported to have told her husband that if the country was going to train pilots for the coming war, some of them ought to be black.)

The rumored program was real. The War Department approved Army Air Corps plans for an all-black pursuit squadron and funds for training enlisted support personnel at the Air Corps Technical School at Chanute Field in January of 1941. Primary pilot training was awarded to Tuskegee Institute with more advanced instruction slated for Tuskegee Army Air Field to be constructed nearby. From its inception, there had been attempts to scuttle the program, but the war effort needed more pilots and despite racist attitudes, no more impediments to stall the trial program could be justified. The first all-black class (42C, following the Corps wide convention of naming the 3rd class in each training program in 1942) was in training and Tuskegee Army Air Field was preparing for more trainees. On March 6, 1942, five black men completed the program, four taking the oath of office and pinning on the wings that told the world they were pilots. The fifth graduate, Captain B. O. Davis Jr., commissioned at West Point in 1936, had at last accomplished his long cherished wish to become a pilot.

Closer to home there was tangible evidence of the program's existence. Fifteen miles north of Champaign at Chanute Field, Colored non flying personnel were being trained to support the 99th Pursuit pilots in Tuskegee. Frances' nephews, Ernest and Cecil Jr., entered the Chanute program. True enough, a quiet recruiting campaign had been launched to find a select number of candidates to undergo the tough screening process. Those gaining admission entered the strenuous training designed to transform them into a combat unit in the Army Air Corp.

Charles decided to apply. In April of 1942, he was sent to northern Indiana to take the written and physical exams. The screening was unique to Charles and having a black applicant was apparently unique to the recruitment officers, as well.

"There was a guy there who had never dealt with any blacks and he kept filling in the blanks wrong because he was writing (I was) white."

Charles wanted to fly. The decision was not hard. Even with the application submitted, the road to Tuskegee proved to be formidable. The next big hurdle was escaping the long arm of the draft. It took months for applications to move through channels and while the draft could be manipulated for a well-connected few, it was a good bet no favors were granted the ordinary man. Like so many institutions, the draft was political, and it was highly unlikely for a poor black boy to pull strings necessary to delay his call, especially while awaiting orders to a little known "Tuskegee experiment." In fact, during the anxious months of hoping and waiting to hear their fate, several aspirants were drafted and had to board the troop trains and report to boot camp.

Some of these draftees pleaded for consideration.

"I've applied for air training. What can be done?"

The response was, "Well, you're in the infantry now, boy."

Few who were drafted transferred to flying.

In late spring of '42, Charles learned he had passed the test and was accepted in the program. Now it was a question of which call to duty would come first.

After the semester, he went back to the mills, but unlike the preceding summer, he spent hard earned money to make the trip to Champaign whenever he could. Mrs. Foster, one of Momma Nellie's boarders, frequently sat on the screened front porch and often was the first to announce his arrival.

"Frances, that 'ole square headed boy is here to see you."

The affection they all felt toward Charles was not veiled by the teasing and banter exchanged.

On those visits, he walked downtown with Frances and her mother, carrying the sacks from their shopping excursions. There were evening strolls hand in hand at the county fair. Long talks began to guardedly explore plans for their future after the war.

On those summer evenings Charles and Frances sat on the porch of the house on Hickory Street. They escaped there to have some time alone, for it was hard to make even the most innocent contact under Momma Nellie's watchful eye.

In addition to a kiss, on one night Charles gave his love an engagement ring. With her consent to marry him, they embarked on a lifelong adventure. The night of their engagement was no exception to the vigil kept by Nellie. Shortly after ten o'clock, the lights on the porch flashed, signaling their fleeting time together was ending.

Charles' future was tied to the draft. As it happened he was never called. A member of Lewis Sr.'s AME church who was also a member of the local draft board knew of his acceptance to the Tuskegee flight school. Charles didn't know it at the time, but this benefactor arranged for his position in the lottery to be "suspended" until he received his orders to report to the special program.

"Years later, on a visit back to Gary, she told me she would just slide my card out of the bunch so they'd pass over it until

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"Years later, on a visit back to Gary, she told me she would just slide my card out of the bunch so they'd pass over it until I got called."

When returning to school in 1942, Frances and Charles faced two big decisions. Frances had graduated cum laude from U. of I. and worked for a professor; Charles had two more years. Considering the options, they agreed he would not enroll for the semester as money was too hard to come by to be spent on a semester which in all probability would not be completed. In the face of so much uncertainty, the two knew the main thing they wanted was to spend whatever time they had together.

"We had to make another decision. If I was drafted or called up to Tuskegee where would that leave us? We finally decided to get married."

They set the date, completed hurried arrangements while Charles worked on in the mills, and married on Saturday, October 17. Lewis Sr. came to officiate at his son's wedding. The ceremony took place in Frances' Hickory Street home which had been gaily decorated for the occasion with fall foliage. Momma Nellie and Grandmother Gay were present. A fraternity brother, Nathaniel "Nate" Green, from Chicago served as best man. Stella, Frances' sister-in-law, was the matron of honor. Frances' brother Leonard, like Lewis Jr. and Cecil, was already in the service and unable to attend.

The traditional honeymoon was not in their plans. The morning after the wedding, Charles and Frances headed to Gary to begin their life together. Living with a friend, they had a room to themselves and the bonus, a shelf in the ice box.

I imagine it could not have seemed closer to perfect.

Forgetting the mounting turmoil around them, their world was fresh and new and ever so briefly, time stood still.

On Monday, October 19, 1942, the morning mail brought Charles' orders. A week later, October 26, he was sworn into the enlisted reserves in preparation for entering Army Air Corps aviation cadet training.

III: The Tuskegee Experience

1942-1943

- The first successful nuclear chain reaction ushered in the atomic age.
- After numerous delays, the all-black 99th Fighter Squadron left Tuskegee to join the war in Northern Africa in April, 1943.
- Racial violence erupted on the home front in Detroit and Harlem during the summer of 1943.
- The Allies invaded Sicily in July, 1943; Italy surrendered unconditionally in September and in October joined Allied forces against German troops still fighting on Italian soil.
- Allied leaders Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin held a summit in Teheran, Iran, to plan war strategies.

Charles reported to Tuskegee Field on November 24, 1942. He and Frances only had a few weeks to pack their belongings, which was more than ample given the few items they had accumulated. The newlyweds had no intentions of being so quickly separated and together they made the trip to Tuskegee, Alabama, 47 miles east of Montgomery. Frances planned to find a job and room close to Tuskegee Air Field, where Charles would be occupied with training six or seven days a week.

In 1942, the trip south was more than a notion for the young black couple accustomed to life north of the Mason-Dixon line. Patterns of discrimination in the North were more subtle, but in the South of the 1940s, rigid Jim Crow laws of segregation were the way of life. The Air Corps had no intention of disrupting these established practices. To the contrary, they

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applications and protection of the laws." His experience and conviction notwithstanding, preconceived notions of less open-minded leaders were deeply rooted and prevailed.

Military leaders were charged with the task of converting a victorious war machine to a scaled-down force, suitable for peace keeping. A victim of this transition, the 332nd was disbanded in 1945. Similar realignments were made leaving holes and gaps in groups in the "white Air Corps," but filling them with black servicemen was not thinkable since it would mean abandoning segregationist philosophy. Instead, the 99th and the 100th combined with two 477th medium bomb squadrons, units which had experienced numerous difficulties under bigoted leadership and never saw combat. Together they formed the 477th Composite Group under the leadership of Colonel B. O. Davis. The war in the Pacific ended before the newly formed group was deployed.

(The 477th Bombardment Group was activated early in 1944 when the accomplishments of 99th Fighter Squadron and 332nd Fighter Group could no longer be denied. Charles instructed pilots to fly the bombers as part of the 12-man crews including navigators, bombardiers and gunners who carried out bomber missions. Expectations for the 477th Bomb Group were high, both for contributions to the war effort and transition to civilian flying jobs afterward, but the war ended before the Group saw combat. Repeated problems stemmed from insufficient commitment to prepare and assemble the necessary elements. Under Colonel Robert Selway, Commander of the 477th Bomb Group, interest in sustaining segregation was the highest priority, leading to an odyssey of ill-conceived relocations from Selfridge to Godman Air Force Base, Freeman Field and back to Godman. Men of the 477th resisted efforts to deny their rights and in the "Freemen Field Incident" 101 were arrested and imprisoned in April of 1945 for refusing to sign an order restricting their use of the Officers' Club as stipulated in Army regulations.)

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During their second stint in Tuskegee, Frances announced to Charles news of his impending fatherhood. She and Charles discussed the prospects of having their first child born in the deep south, and both felt the stigma of rigid segregation would forever be associated with an Alabama birthplace. Several months before my due date, Mom returned home to Champaign to await delivery and Dad stayed to continue twin engine instruction. They had been together less than a year and another separation wasn't easy, but Charles was flying and that part of the job he loved.

On November 13, 1945 word reached Charles of the birth of his daughter. He hadn't been on hand for the birth or twelve hours of labor preceding, which was as much the rule as an exception for military fathers. Frances' mother, Momma Nellie, was there to instruct the hospital staff and welcome her granddaughter. Three days passed before Charles could join them.

If events before had established his sense of purpose and duty, the sight of his tiny infant daughter, now a part of his life, served to further strengthen them. Responsibility to God, country and family took on new meaning when it included six pound, ten ounce Charlene Edwina McGee. Dad had chosen to make me his namesake. His large hands were more prepared to operate the controls of an airplane than to hold his daughter who seemed so small and fragile. Combat was perhaps less intimidating. Nevertheless, he doubled his commitment to make a good life for his family. Fortune smiled on me when I came into his safekeeping.

Soon after confinement, Frances was able to travel and we returned to Tuskegee. The family set up housekeeping there until Charles' reassignment in June of 1946. During this time, Lewis Sr. made a trip south to greet his new granddaughter. After the war, he met Marcella Walker Harris during a visit to the Chicago public library. Among throngs of people, he spotted her behind the librarian's desk, which gave him the

at Lockbourne and throughout the Corp. Charles understood the value of having a technical skill in addition to flying and, assessing his background and interests, decided to couple his pilot skills with maintenance expertise. In the summer of 1948, he applied for technical training as an Aircraft Maintenance Officer and completed the ten month course at Chanute Field in Rantoul, just north of Champaign, Illinois. As a nationwide training facility, Chanute was an exception to the rule, an integrated operation. There were a few restrictions even at Chanute, such as separate barber shops, but for the most part, the races worked and trained together. Charles was one of twelve officers in his class in the specialized program.

As anticipated, the aircraft maintenance and technical training gave Charles additional expertise the armed services needed. Timing too was right; things were beginning to change. When the Air Force, now a separate service from the Army since 1947, reactivated the 332nd Fighter Group and phased out the 477th composite group that had the B-25, there was no longer need for navigators at Lockbourne. However, the strict rule of segregation did not permit the reassignment of surplus black navigators to units where they were needed. To do so would have meant integrating the units against the Army's position. Air Force leadership, on the other hand, viewed the enforcement of segregation a poor use of manpower and too costly to maintain. A year in advance of Truman's executive order desegregating all branches of the military, Air Force officials led the way, selectively reassigning black servicemen from Lockbourne based on their qualifications.

In the final analysis, pressures brought to bear combined with enlightened self interest to bring an official end to segregation in the Air Force. The decision was an economic one. Despite differing opinions about its morality, segregation in the military was duplicative, inefficient and costly. Charles recognized that economic advantage was the impetus for change in the military. Just as in the private sector, the power of the

"almighty greenback" was at work. Lacking a prevailing moral conviction, numerous obstacles were present to impede progress in desegregation. It was not all he hoped for, but it was a beginning.

The stage was set and in July of 1948, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 calling for the integration of the Armed Services.

WHEREAS it is essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standard of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense;

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, by the Constitution and the statutes of the United States, and as Commander in Chief of the armed services, it is hereby ordered as follows:

1. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.

Truman's order gave the desired action the force of law. Henceforth, assignments would be solely based on qualifications. Under the new directive, deployment of the Air Force's most experience Black officers and technicians, those of the 332nd, was accelerated.

Adding to momentous events, on September 6, 1948 Frances gave birth to Charles' son, Ronald Allen. As was the case with my birth, Dad was away on assignment, this time in school at Chanute. He had come home the weekend before, hoping to be on hand for the big event. Time ran out and Charles had to return. As soon as he got back to Chanute, a message was waiting for him. Frances was in the hospital. Before he could

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Ribbons earned were worn on uniforms and the men knew Charles was a combat veteran, which may have helped. At work, things were on a good track.

Away from the job was a different story. There was no base housing. Servicemen with families had to find accommodations in Salina, but there was no place Charles could even rent, let alone buy. He was making progress in his career, but unable to have his family join him. Frances moved the children back to Champaign, Illinois, to wait while Charles lived in the bachelor officers' quarters (BOQ). Like it or not, this was the situation. He ate at the club, played bingo on Wednesday nights and did what he could to occupy time which otherwise would have been devoted to his family.

There were those on the job who didn't like taking orders from a black. Whether concerned about keeping their ratings up, getting promotions or for some other reason, they kept their feelings to themselves. Some may have been glad for change, but just as there was no open resistance, no overt show of support was offered either. No one rushed up with open arms.

Charles remembered one of the officers who made an overture. An operations officer like Charles at Lockbourne, he invited Charles to check out a plane with him.

"Hey, you're a pilot. Would you like to come over and fly this B-29?"

"Great!"

Charles was not passing up an opportunity to fly. The chance was a welcome change from the C-47Ds and B-25Js he flew to keep up his skills. The next time there was a craft to test, Charles went along as copilot. He was already qualified in a single and twin engine and was beginning to get a feel for flying the four engine B-29.

Flying while at Salina gave him another opportunity he was grateful for. Pilots needed proficiency flying and night flying. When a base aircraft was available and Charles was able to get the weekend off, after work on Friday he flew to Chanute. If

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the aircraft wasn't immediately needed, it could stay on RON (remain overnight) status, so Charles spent the night at home. It was one advantage of being a pilot, if the schedule allowed, but those times were too few and far between.

As a part of the ongoing readjustment of units after wartime, Air Force leaders decided they no longer needed Smoky Hill Air Base. The 301st Bomb Wing at Smoky Hill was assigned to Barksdale Field, Louisiana! In preparation for the move, Charles' task was to get all the machines unbolted from the floor, packed, crated and made ready for shipment. Knowing about family life for blacks in the south, he was not looking forward to joining the bomb wing there.

With preparing for shipment complete, Charles' orders arrived separating him from the Wing and sparing him the move south to Barksdale. Instead, he was to report to March Field near Riverside, California, as officer in charge of Inspection and Flight Test for the 22nd Bomb Wing and 1st Fighter Group. It is hard to imagine anyone happier to get a set of orders. Luck was on his side and Riverside it was!

Charles and Frances looked forward to being reunited and traveling west to California, the fabled land of golden beaches and movie stars. They had sidestepped the devil they knew in favor of one not yet introduced.

As the long journey to seek their new fortune began, Charles and Frances loaded their worldly possessions and two small kids in a 1949 Hudson for the cross country trek westward from America's heartland. Restaurants beckoned from billboards and motels displayed vacancy signs, but their messages were intended for white travelers. For non-whites, many stops were often made before finding food and lodging. In the meantime, hunger and exhaustion set in.

"It hurt to be denied a room at a motel when you could see the vacancy sign flashing in the window."

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For Charles, the thought of sleeping along the roadside was more intimidating than the crudest rebuff, especially traveling with his family. En route they faced indifference and open hostility, and recognized them as a cost to bare for being black in America.

Years later, my husband and I drove from Champaign, Illinois, to his military assignment on the east coast. Although we stopped to eat wherever we chose and had no trouble finding a motel for the night, everything was new and strange. I had the eerie feeling I'd stepped off the edge of the known universe. Interstate highways turned to state routes, which gave way to country roads across uninhabited stretches of no man's land. The thought a dark-skinned stranger might not be welcome crossed my mind in 1965.

My parents' journey decades before was much more intimidating. In the best light, it should have been an adventure. Instead, it turned into an endurance test. The map showed the route, but did not warn it was a harder road for blacks to travel. Contemplating their journey, I felt connected to them and all our ancestors whose way was made similarly difficult.

I was too little to remember the trip to California, but as we grew, my brother and I learned the survival skills my parents had to acquire. I learned the process of finding lodging was a delicate and unpredictable one. I learned to read Dad's expression as he returned to the car and know whether or not we would be staying at that location for the night or pushing on to the next stop in the road. I learned that humiliating experiences could be borne with dignity and an unwavering sense of self worth, earning deepening love and respect. I learned the ultimate reward for patience and perseverance was sometimes a good night's sleep.

Whatever notions Charles and Frances had of California, when they arrived, tested and tired, the Riverside they found

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was as segregated as Salina, Kansas. There was no housing for Negroes anywhere near March Air Force Base. After repeated inquiries, a white fellow and his Indian wife offered them a nice place on the opposite side of town. It was on a hill with a steep, sandy approach. The man kept his chickens under the back porch. Sometimes the kids accompanied him when he stopped by to gather eggs.

It was a serene picture, this house on a hill with chickens scratching in the gravel yard. During the day, the children played in the sunshine and crisp white sheets waved on the clothes line. At night, Dad came home and we ate dinner and went for a drive or just did things together until it was time for me and Ron to go to bed. Afterward, Dad and Mom would sit at the kitchen table or outside under the stars and talk. It was a "normal" family life, not to be taken for granted.

At work things were "normal" too. The Air Force was moving to consolidated maintenance control. Rather than each squadron having its own inspection and flight testing, management was being centralized. March Field had a bomb wing and a fighter group. Reporting to Charles were flight test officers from these units. He was still doing proficiency flying in C-47s or whatever they had available at the base. March Field had C-47s for depot runs to pick up supplies or transport personnel. There were also aircraft to move the commander around and take care of other official travel.

At headquarters, Air Force initiatives were being drafted. Personnel were being selected for overseas replacements based on the number of months back in the States from combat assignment. There was a need for maintenance officers in the Philippine Islands. Charles, having returned from Europe in November of 1944, was high on the list to be rotated, even though he had been at March Field less than a year.

husbands and wives. Nevertheless, her matter-of-fact reply shocked me.

"So, that's all you have to worry about."

I was dumbfounded; she hadn't understood. I tried to explain. Mom patiently informed me that far from terrible, this was to be expected. Rather than being upset, I should be grateful Bill wasn't going to Vietnam. She assured me the year would pass and Bill and I would most likely survive what in hindsight would be a relatively short separation.

I couldn't imagine how my own mother could be so callous. Of course, in hindsight she was perfectly right. Still, I can't help thinking she was not so calm and objective when she said good-by to Dad as he boarded the troop train leaving Michigan twenty-two years before. I suspect her heart ached as much as mine and innumerable others throughout time.

In late December, 1943, Frances left Detroit driving the Hudson back home to Champaign, Illinois, with the company of her half sister Sadie as Charles began his journey to war. After shipping out from Virginia, he spent days at sea zigzagging across the Atlantic before the first sighting of the land when the convoy passed through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean. From there, they journeyed along the northern coast of Africa, then turning north to dock in Taranto, Italy, on February 3rd. On land, the squadron boarded trucks for a road trip over the mountains.

It was slow going. The caravan had to negotiate narrow, winding roads which weaved up and down steep slopes across the arch of the boot in southern Italy. The cliffs were sheer with precipitous drops. Trucks, after climbing these hazardous roads, had to ease through cramped streets in small villages perched on the mountain tops. Images were a far cry from the U. S. countryside familiar to Charles and the sight of the lumbering motorcade must have been equally strange to the hilltop inhabitants.

Reaching their destination, the fliers made camp at Montecorvino, south of Naples. The location was nothing more than an airstrip and adjacent row of tents serving as billets, mess and headquarters. After settling in, Charles and the others started the routine they would associate with life in the combat zone, patrolling Naples harbor to the Isle of Capri and along the coast. Ground time consisted of briefings, maintenance of equipment and aircraft and waiting.

Not all flying assignments were associated with a combat mission. Airborne testing was required after maintenance to verify the plane's readiness. Charles was one of the pilots called on to do "test hops". Accompanying these activities and the eternal waiting was the ever present cup of GI coffee. Charles added liberal amounts of cream and sugar to make his more palatable.

The plane assigned was the P-39Q Airacobra, essentially a low altitude aircraft flown at 10,000 to 15,000 feet. Too slow for effective aerial interception, missions mainly involved harbor and coastal patrols to determine the movement of German and Italian forces.

"By the time we reached altitude to intercept intruders, they were usually back in Germany. It was frustrating."

Though airfields like Capodichino where the squadron relocated in early March were not a major objective for the enemy, they were not spared either. Nuisance raids were made by German aircraft aware of the American presence. Radar technology was relatively primitive and there was seldom advanced warning. Night raids were the most common. Not long after Charles' arrival a raid succeeded in damaging twenty seven of his squadron's planes on the ground. In the aftermath of the attack, Charles recalled the rush to dig deeper foxholes. No one complained.

Night raids never became routine, but searchlights crisscrossing the dark sky were part of life. So were British rations. Charles found powdered eggs to be the most objectionable item

of sightseeing was enough to take in the mandatory Statue of Liberty and Empire State Building and produce sticker shock, which let Dad know we needed to move on quickly. The next morning, Mom and Dad left to pick up our car which had been shipped to a dock in New Jersey. Our instructions were simple.

"Stay in your room. Don't move, don't call (room service), don't do anything."

The following day we packed and headed inland. The ride gave us time to take in the novelties of the U.S. countryside. In Champaign, Illinois, we were reunited with extended family we hadn't seen in three years. I will never forget two unrelated events which happened in Champaign that summer. The first was a stroke of fortune; I met William, who would one day be my spouse. Second, I ran away from home over a question of integrity.

There was a puppy at Momma Nellie's house that was restricted to the back porch while being house broken. The dog got inside and made a mess at a time Dad thought I was the only one home who could have let him in. When I denied doing it, a heated exchange ensued. Dad took my insistence as insolence and slapped me! I was stunned! And hurt. More by being called a liar than the stinging cheek. It was the first time Dad had ever slapped me, plus I hadn't had a childhood whippin' in years! I was sixteen and too old for this! I decided I had to get away.

Fueled by anger, and against my better judgment, I took a hundred dollars from Mom's purse and a few belonging before sneaking out of the house. As I walked toward town a plan took shape and I went to the train station, purchasing a ticket to Chicago, convinced that Aunt Sadie would take me in. The bonus was I wouldn't have to go to North Dakota.

Before the scheduled departure, I had time to buy stationary and a stamp at the nearby dime store and mailed all but ten dollars of the remaining money to Mom. The police greeted me in front of the station as I returned to catch the train. My

attempt to run away ended before I got out of town. Secretly, I was relieved. Back at home, Dad told me he found out Aunt Stella let the dog in the house. I was vindicated. Dad taught me to tell the truth and I had learned the lesson well. So well, in fact, any doubt about my honesty was a personal affront I couldn't abide. Especially from him.

From Champaign, we headed north on the final leg of the road trip which would take us to Minot. As we traveled the landmarks became fewer and farther between. The country of the big horizon lay ahead. Towns became crossroads with a gas station, store and house or two. There was not even a promised ice cream cone to be had. Rest stops were reduced to an unplumbed toilet and picnic bench and finally, a sign along the road and single trash can. We were passing through the wilderness known as the "Bad Lands," and with nothing on the horizon, it was truly "great sky" country.

Charles reported for duty as Director of Plans and Programs for the Minot Air Defense Sector. From the "Block House" he and his staff administered plans for activity in the sector, coordinating elements of air defense against the threat of Russian bombers and missiles seeking to strike over the northern border.

Deteriorating relations between Cuba and the U.S. reached a critical stage in the fall of 1962. Despite repeated denials by the Soviet Union and the Cuban government, the United States charged the Soviet Union with the establishment of intermediate-range missiles bases in Cuba, a development the United States would not tolerate since it placed significant offensive military capabilities in the Caribbean. Although the focus of preparedness was in another sector, the increased level of alert was felt as far north as Minot.

Even as crises rose around the globe, some aspects of military life were carried out in a contrasting state of normalcy.

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Urbana campus. The choice of Mom's and Dad's *alma mater* was easy, since Momma Nellie's house in Champaign remained our "permanent" address over the years, making me eligible to attend as an in-state student. Ron and Yvonne started school in the fall and with Mom and Dad established a household routine.

It was during this time Charles almost lost his perfect record. An officer and a gentleman, he prided himself in being well spoken and never used profanity. Sitting around the dinner table one evening, he became fed up listening to Ron and Yvonne bellyaching about something trivial. He glared from one to the other in foreboding silence, and then he blew.

"Well, tough...ah...huh...(the family waited in horror as he struggled)...ahhhhh...umm...(he finally blurted)...TITTY!!!!"

He looked at his shocked family who stole glances at one another, but dared not speak. At the relief of knowing his record was tarnished, but in tact, it was clear Frances was tickled and wrestling to suppress laughter. Somehow Ron and Yvonne managed to choke down the rest of their dinner having totally forgotten what they were fussing about. It was a close call. Ron and Yvonne had never seen Dad so exasperated or speechless, and though I missed the moment, I can appreciate it.

In Kansas City at Central Air Defense Force Headquarters, Charles filled a position in the Directorate of Logistics, with responsibility for assigned aircraft and missiles. Central territory ranged from the Arizona gulf region across the country's midland to Florida. Charles, and the officers and airmen reporting to him, monitored compliance with regulations, went into the field to examine how craft were maintained, and inspected the quality of work performed. Sometimes, testing called for planes to be deployed to simulate enemy penetration. The exercises gave Charles the welcome opportunity to fly. During drills, pilots of defending aircraft scrambled to intercept and identify, then returned to base to land for recovery operations and second wave responses.

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The first year of college I spent Christmas break in Kansas City. After the holiday, Dad and I braved a snowstorm to get me back to school on roads that were icy and hazardous. Rather than taking the wheel, Dad wanted me to gain experience driving in these difficult conditions and coached me through tense miles of slow progress. Coming around a slow-moving vehicle on a single lane road, the car lost traction, entered a skid and rolled into a ditch. I blacked out for a time.

Coming to, I realized Dad was okay and except for a missing earring and shoe, I also appeared to be in one piece. Passersby helped us right the small car and return it to the highway. At a nearby gas station, Dad determined the car needed minor repairs which could not be accomplished before the next morning. Another car in the station displayed a U. of I. window sticker and to my shock and amazement Dad secured a ride from total strangers, white graduate students who took me on to Champaign and put me up in their dorm for the night.

Still in a daze when Dad arrived the next day, I did not object when he suggested Mom didn't need to know the details of the harrowing event. The following year I was happy to travel by train during the holidays.

In April '65, everyday activities were punctuated by a special occasion. Dad accompanied me down the aisle and gave my hand in marriage to William Yancy Smith. The romance which budded three years before had bloomed into full grown love and a commitment to be together as Bill graduated from the University of Illinois and was commissioned as a lieutenant in the U. S. Army. We married shortly after. A relative told me she had expected to get the announcement of my college graduation before the announcement of my wedding. If Dad felt that way, he did not say so. In the pictures of the wedding party, he and I are smiling. Behind those smiles are the unspoken thoughts of a father letting go and the joy of a daughter so absorbed in her new life, she does not know her father's feelings.

take me out. Dad gave permission. Although we talked on the phone, and he came by the house on several occasions, I never went out with him. After this had gone on for a while, Dad told me he thought it was a mistake to make a decision about dating based on race. In doing that, he thought I would be following judgment no better than bigoted whites. I gave this matter serious thought. In the end I did not change my mind. With so many black airmen on base and only one young black woman, prostitutes aside, it didn't seem right for me to date a white man. In this case, racial sensitivity overrode concerns about racial bias. If Dad was disappointed, he never pressed the issue.

Interracial relationships remain a source of consternation and controversy. Many blacks and whites prefer to date and marry within their own race and believe everyone should adhere to their standards. Others view affairs of the heart as colorblind. The McGee's are a "rainbow" family with both views evident.

Dad did not judge the worth of individuals based on the color of their skin. Nevertheless, he distinguished racial pride from racial prejudice. Pride recognizes our African American heritage as a rich and compelling legacy to honor and preserve, but a positive self image does not demand bigotry or intolerance associated with prejudice. Diminishing others is not a prerequisite.

Dad helped me understand these feelings and put them in perspective.

A significant sign that times were changing was Charles' assignment to 10th Air Force Headquarters at Richards-Gebaur AFB based on the strength of his credentials and prior experience.

XIII: Survival Training

1963-1967

- On August 28, 1963, a quarter of a million people, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., attended the March on Washington, D.C. urging support for pending civil rights legislation.
- In October four black children were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.
- President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.
- President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- The U.S. began full-scale military operations in support of South Vietnam.

In the summer of 1963, it was good to be heading to Kansas City again. During the drive from Minot, we were delighted when trees reappeared on the landscape as we crossed the state boundary into Minnesota. Though we lived on base and were received more openly than the last time, we were also reunited with friends and church members in the black community fondly remembered from the previous stint in Kansas City. We moved into a comfortable ranch house on Bong Avenue and to Dad's feigned surprise admitted we had no idea Bong was a World War II pilot famed for aerial exploits, who was killed in a test flight accident. Frankly, Richards and Gebaur were also mysteries to us, but we learned they were natives of Kansas City who were killed in the line of duty during the first and second World Wars. I stayed in Kansas City long enough to help Mom settle into the house before heading to college at the University of Illinois, Champaign-

had never seen before. His eyes were not as bright and even though he sounded the same, I had the feeling he was working hard to hold a regular conversation.

It was difficult for me to image how Dad could have changed so much in one year and I was worried for him, however the most troubling changes were short lived. William and I were living in married student housing at the University of Illinois and our daughter Tesha, Dad's first grandchild, was almost two years old. I'm sure Dad felt I too had changed. In ensuing years I understood better the nature of change, but that has not dulled the startling impression Dad made when he returned from Vietnam.

Charles initial assignment was in Hiedelberg, Germany with the United States Army Europe (USAEUR) and 7th Army as Air Liaison Officer. At Hiedelberg in the fall of 1968, he observed two anniversaries. One was 26 years of marriage (he spent his silver wedding anniversary in Southeast Asia) and the second was his silver anniversary for 25 years of military service.

Early the following year, he celebrated his promotion to full colonel. As the time of the promotion approached, Frances was giddy with excitement. The new rank could not officially be pinned on before the effective date, so Charles and Frances, not wanting to break the rules, set the clock for midnight and woke Yvonne up for an official family pinning ceremony. Pictures were taken to record the momentous event and, until now, only the three of them knew that below his uniform jacket, Dad was wearing pajama bottoms.

The "bird colonel" rank led to his assignment as Chief of Maintenance for the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing at Hahn Air Base, Germany. Hahn was a small air base tucked in beautiful mountains near the Luxembourg border. In some ways the assignment was an exhilarating chapter in Charles' flying

experience. In others it signaled the beginning of the end of a distinguished military career.

Excitement came with the introduction of the newly assigned F-4E. This craft was planned for air defense work, as compared to the Wing's F-4C ("Wild Weasel"), used for electronic surveillance, and the F-4D model, fulfilling the normal tactical fighter role. The E model had the latest electronic features and a more powerful engine. The advent of these state of the art aircraft heightened Charles' enthusiasm for flying.

"You knew right away you were in the Cadillac, not the Model-T."

The F-4 was capable of achieving a speed of mach 2 (twice the speed of sound). In breaking the sound barrier for the first time, Charles experienced velocity at its most thrilling. He felt himself pinned to the seat and the stiffness of the controls caused by the dynamic pressure. Without an outside point of reference, there was no way to grasp the marvel of it. A glance at his fuel gauge though was a true measure of the magnitude of difference. Above mach 1, he was burning fuel far faster than the normal rate and could literally see the indicator needle dropping. Fully fueled, at maximum power the flying time in the F-4 was about 32 minutes, while during normal cruise it was over two hours.

At supersonic speeds, added velocity became harder to achieve.

"You reach mach 1 rather quickly. From that point to 1.5 takes longer and then even longer to see 1.7..... 1.8..... and the goal, mach 2 on the air speed indicator."

Charles explained the accumulating mass of compacted air in front of the plane creates greater and greater resistance and the controls become stiff, as if frozen.

While Dad was breaking the sound barrier, Ron was studying about it. He joined Air Force ROTC program at KU. With Vietnam protesters and dissension boiling, joining didn't serve

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Island, Florida. After Yvonne's graduation in 1971, Charles took his family home.

Returning to R-G, Charles took the post of Director of Maintenance Engineering for AFCS. With the position came responsibility for communication systems, including military satellites now circling the globe. After three years in Europe, there was a lot of personal catching up to do with family and friends. Tesha was almost five and there was a second granddaughter, Damona Gay, named after her paternal great grandmother. She was almost two years old when they saw her for the first time at Ron's wedding.

Passing through Illinois Charles and Frances stopped in Batavia to visit his sister Ruth, her husband Jacob "Jake" Downs and their five sons. I had visited with the Downs family several times while Mom and Dad were overseas. It was a way to keep in touch with relatives with my parents and siblings so far away. Ruth never ceased to amaze me with the energy she poured into her work and boys. Once they visited my tiny apartment in Champaign, bringing food in bowls too big to wash in my kitchen sink. I never forgot the Thanksgiving evening in Batavia when she put 42 pork chops on a rotisserie grill just after dark, in case somebody wanted "a snack" before bed. Her growing boys loved to eat.

That visit in 1971 was the last time Charles would see his sister alive. She died unexpectedly the following Spring, not having reached her fiftieth birthday. At her funeral, her boys sat shoulder to shoulder and took up an entire church pew. She had given them a solid start and they would have to move on without her. So would Charles, now the sole surviving child of Lewis Sr. and Ruth McGee.

Good things were recorded in 1971 though. Yvonne started college at Hampton Institute as a mass media arts major. On October 14, 1971, Charles' first grandson, Damon Yancy Smith, was born into the family. A proud Grandma ("Ga") and Grandpa ("Pa Pa Gee") visited us several weeks later. Ronald

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defied predictions and graduated from KU with a degree in aerospace engineering. He started active duty in the Air Force in December of that year. In addition to Dad's determination and perseverance, he had inherited a desire to fly and gained admittance to pilot training at Lorado Air Force Base in Texas. When he finished the program, Dad flew to Lorado to pin on Ron's wings. During the pinning the fist pair of wings was broken, by tradition representing each pilots first accident now banished in the ceremonial act.

The ceremony offered a time to reflect on his own career. Charles' wings had been pinned on by Frances almost three decades earlier. Since then he had added a star above the wings when he made senior pilot, and finally a wreath surrounding the star when he became a command pilot. His chest was covered with rows of medals commemorating distinguished service in three wars and thirty years. There had been tremendous stereotypes to overcome. Charles and his fellow black Airmen confronted them and because they were resolute, he could now see his son, standing on the shoulders of his forebearers, reach for a higher rung.

Charles' military career was approaching an end. He and other Tuskegee Airmen watched younger men with less time in grade move to the ranks of general officer, while they began to contemplate civilian life. For Charles, there may have been disappointment, but no bitterness or regrets. His military career was one of accomplishment and distinction. He had served well. For Frances the idea was a welcome one. For so long she had been bound by the dictates of service life. The idea of retirement meant no more separation and greater freedom. She looked forward to fewer demands.

During Dad's last year in the Air Force, Major General Paul Stony, head of Communication Service, asked Charles to take command of Richards-Gebaur AFB. Col. Aubrey Gaskins was too ill to lead and Stony selected Charles to be his replacement.

stigma of being associated with a failed venture under possibly shady circumstances. He wasn't talking about it, but Frances acknowledged that some people involved would be indicted and, if convicted, could go to jail.

In the aftermath, ISC reorganized and sold Interstate Securities Company in the summer of 1978. Charles and other personnel were not continued, but a veteran of conflict, his past allowed him to withstand this disturbing chain of events. More than a survivor, he had become adept at turning adversity to advantage. The guiding principle was simple.

"Accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative."

The separation from ISC became an opportunity for Charles to focus on a lifelong ambition. Always a staunch believer in the value of education, he pursued formal training throughout the years. One thing he had wanted since his days at the University of Illinois eluded him, a college degree. His time at U. of I., Command and Staff School, studies while in Minnesota and recent courses while at ISC were credits toward a college diploma. A degree granting program was needed to pull them together. Columbia College in Columbia, Missouri, provided an extension program to meet the need. Returning to school was a labor of love for Charles. It didn't matter he was generation or more older than his classmates. He had the zeal and commitment of a man on a quest.

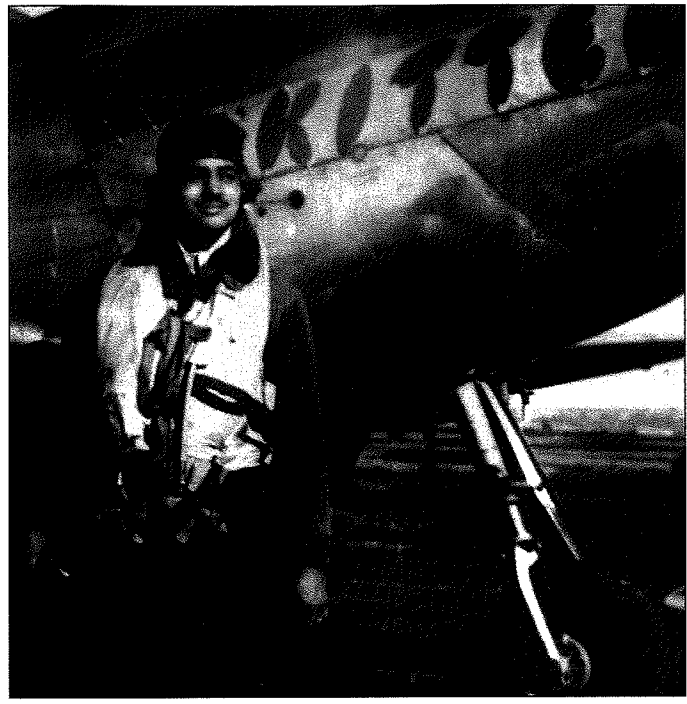
Charles earned a baccalaureate degree in June of 1979 with Dean's List honors. It was an achievement that rivaled others in a life of accomplishments, and with it came a strong sense of personal satisfaction. His commitment to education was enacted on another front as well. In 1979 TAI established its National Scholarship Fund. With his strong support over ensuing years, this permanent endowment, valued at more than a million dollars, would award hundreds of scholarships to students pursuing their dreams in the field of aviation.

"It's all about training and opportunity....an ongoing fight to find and develop the potential in all Americans."

After earning his degree, Charles accepted an administrative position with the City of Prairie Village, Kansas. That appointment was brief. After six months, he left to go to his father's bedside and be with him in the last weeks of his life. Living in Pullman, Washington, with his wife and step daughter, Joan Harris, Lewis Sr. had become terminally ill with prostate cancer and within weeks following surgery died of the disease. His body was cremated and his ashes interred in Arlington National Cemetery. Shortly after his death, Charles returned to Kansas City to begin a new chapter in his own life.



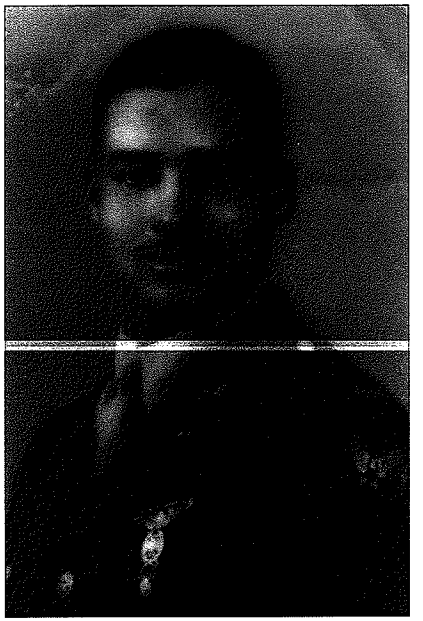
7. The Class of 43-F, Tuskegee Army Air Field, SE Flying Training Command, June 1943
(Charles front row 4th from right)



8. World War II: Charles with his P-51C "Kitten."



9. Frances at home during WWII.



10. Charles in Italy during WWII.