



Charles “Chief” Anderson
An Aviation Pioneer

In spite of limited opportunities, African Americans have played a significant role in United States Military’s history for nearly 300 years. In the military, they were denied an opportunity to actively participate as equals. Prior to the Tuskegee Experiment, they were not allowed to fly as military pilots and were restricted as civilian pilots in being able to learn to fly and purchase airplanes.

The Tuskegee program was considered an experiment due to the fact that in 1925, the United States War Department had conducted a study that said African Americans were superstitious, cowards, and did not have the cranial capacity to accomplish any task beyond a menial level. The War Department set about to prove this assumption with the “Tuskegee Experiment,”; which we now know backfired twenty years later. It has been sixty-seven years since World War II ended and, to this day, the 332nd Fighter Pilot Group of World War II (Tuskegee Airmen) is considered one of the most recognized Fighter Pilot group from that era adding to the reports inaccuracy.

It was in this climate of racism that Charles Anderson took control of the Tuskegee Civilian Pilots Training Program to teach young African Americans, who came from all over the United States, to teach them how to fly. Eventually, all of the pilots who successfully trained at Morton Field were transferred to Tuskegee Army Air Field.

The Civilian Pilots Training Program was very successful under Anderson’s leadership and is considered one of the determining factors in the Army Air Corps’ decision to establish primary military training at Tuskegee, which became known as the Civilian Pilots Training Program. Another factor that may have had significant influence was a trip made to Tuskegee in 1940 by Eleanor Roosevelt, who took a flight with Charles Anderson. After the flight, Mrs. Roosevelt posed with Charles for a publicity shot in the air plane in which they flew. This flight may have also been instrumental in the establishment of military training at the Tuskegee Army Air Field.

As Chief Flight Instructor of the Civilian Pilots Training Program at Tuskegee, Anderson supervised flight training for 1,000 African American pilots at Motion Field, Tuskegee, AL. After Pilots completed their training at Moton Field, they transferred over to Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF) to complete their training with the Army Air Corps. TAAF was designed as a military pilots training center, which was funded by the military. This training program was the beginning of the military project known as the “Tuskegee Experiment.”

Charles Anderson is considered an icon of African American aviation training at Tuskegee, AL’s Motion Field. Born in 1907 in Bridgeport, PA, Anderson, by the age of six had become enamored with airplanes and flying. During the early days of aviation training of African Americans and the Civilian Pilot Training Program of the late thirties, he was one of the most experienced African American pilots in the United States. Anderson is spoken of very fondly by all who knew him as a pilot and flight instructor... in these circles he is known as “Chief” Anderson.

Charles Anderson had unique aviation experiences as a pilot. He taught himself how to fly. During the early days of aviation in the United States, it was difficult for an African American to find someone willing to provide pilot training. Even the world famous pilot Charles Lindbergh was not exempt from the



powers of racism with regards to African Americans in aviation and other pilots of color, when he referred to keeping the skies clear of pilots of color **“One of the priceless possessions which permit the white race to live at all in a pressing sea of yellow, Black and Brown.”** Although there were many white Pilots who were of Lindbergh’s persuasion, there were other Pilots who looked at African Americans as equals and were willing to teach them to fly. One such pilot was an individual by the name of Buehl, who provided flight training to Anderson and provided support for him when a racist Pilot Examiner, who intended to flunk Anderson during a check ride for his Pilot’s license.

Prior to receiving training from Buehl, Charles Anderson purchased an airplane and taught himself how to fly it. He began by taxiing the airplane on the ground and eventually increasing his ground speed until he was moving over the ground at almost flying speed. Eventually, he developed enough confidence to lift the airplane wheels from the surface and start flying. He received his pilot’s license by the age of twenty-two in a used airplane that he had purchased from his savings and money he borrowed from family and friends.

He earned a private license in 1929 and commercial licenses in 1922. During the next two years, Anderson made several historical flights accompanied by his friend Dr. Forsythe. On their first continental flight, they flew from Atlantic City, NJ to Los Angeles, CA and back, becoming the first African Americans to complete such flight.

Dr. Forsythe had experienced the inability to get flight training in the United States and he went to Canada to complete his medical studies and learn to fly. He teamed up with Anderson and they made long distance trips to Canada and eventually conducted a tour through several Caribbean Islands by hopping from Florida to the Bahamas and ultimately ending their trip in Trinidad. Their flights attracted worldwide attention and did much to make aviation popular in the African American community.

As a pilot during the late twenties and early thirties, “Chief” Anderson’s early record as an Aviator was well known and he was looked upon as the perfect candidate to head up a Civilian Pilot training Program at Tuskegee, AL. In 1940, he was hired as the chief instructor of training with the responsibility of developing a flight training program, which was known as the Civilian Pilots Training Program (CPTP).

As one of the last aviation pioneers, Charles Anderson died at his home in Tuskegee, AL on April 13, 1996 after a lengthy bout with cancer. At the time of his death, he had been a resident of Tuskegee, AL for fifty-six years. The last memory that I have of Charles “Chief” Anderson was watching him climb in an aircraft at Motion Field for a flight into airspace that he had traveled hundreds of times.

