



### **The Saga of Willie “Suicide” Jones**

I have read several sources on the life of Willie “Suicide” Jones and there does not appear to be a definitive place or date of birth for him. I am quoting one source who indicated that he was born in 1915 on a farm near Leland, Mississippi. According to this source, he ran away from the farm at age 13 and came upon a field where he saw his first airplane and developed his love for flying.

According to the article, Jones was given a ride by the pilot who happened to be a wing walker and on his first ride was given instruction on how to go out on the wing of the airplane. From this initial experience, Jones is reported to have begun his career as a stunt aviator; which lasted for more than thirty years. Jones was well known in the “Stunt Circuit” and knew most of the Pilots who performed stunt flying.

There are two accountings of how he got his nickname, “Suicide”; one account indicates that he made a jump in 1934, where his ripcord became entangled in his bootlaces. He struggled to get his chute opened and with only seconds left he managed to get it open. Because no one saw him land, his pilot thought that he was dead and was surprised when he appeared the next day alive and well.

Another account of how he got the nickname “Suicide” occurred when he made a jump for the government in a test of searchlights in Little Rock, Arkansas for the Coast Guard. He jumped from a plane at over 10,000 feet while bright lights blinded him and he could not see the ground. He was forced to estimate his height and pull the ripcord when he thought he was close to the ground. Jones was blinded for several days from this experience. Several white parachutists had refused to make the jump prior to “Suicide” Jones’s jump ...this jump put him in a class by himself.

Jones continued to accept challenges and on one occasion he set his sights on breaking the record for a “Delayed Parachute Jump.” After several attempts to capture the record, he succeeded on March 2, 1939. Suicide made a successful jump at Chicago’s Municipal Airport. He jumped from an airplane and did a “free-fall”; he did not pull the ripcord to open his parachute until he had fallen 24,468 feet, which was only 800 feet above the ground.

Jones worked as a stunt aviator for over thirty years and performed in as many as twenty air circuses and barnstorming tours. Some of his specialties were hanging from a rope while the plane did loops and changing planes in midair. His preferred specialty was the “delayed parachute jump.” According to the African American newspaper, the Chicago Defender, he joined the Hollywood Flying Circus, a group that did stunt movies. Throughout the thirties, Jones competed in US Army airshows while becoming one of the best jumpers in the country.

World War II interrupted the barnstorming business and “Suicide” Jones is reported to have joined the Merchant Marines, an article in a 1950 Ebony Magazine refers to him as an “ex-Merchant Seaman.” After the war, he was known to have worked in the Chicago-area airshows.



“Suicide” Jones also had an interest in long-distance flying records; although there is no record of him ever making an attempt to physically challenge one of these records. He had announced before the war that he was going to attempt to break Howard Hughes’ long-distance record by flying from New York to Seattle and back. Again in May of 1947, he announced his intention of making an attempt to beat the around-the-world record that had been set earlier by Milton Edwards. The Plane used to obtain this record was civilian registered surplus military B-26 Invader, which was a light twin engine Bomber used during World War II, Korean War and Indo-China, and Vietnam wars. It was first flown on July 10, 1942, and after initial modifications it was considered satisfactory for service. It was unique with its single pilot cockpit seat with no need for a dedicated co-pilot. After modifications, it became the fastest bomber of World War II, with two powerful Pratt and Whitney R2800 engines. Near the end of its useful life, the B-26 would have a Pratt and Whitney R-2800-52W engine, which produced 2500 horse power. This is the challenge that “Suicide” Jones would be attempting to take on. For sure he would need backers and a host of support people, which I doubt he would have had in 1947. At least he still had his imagination and could dream of things that were beyond his reach - knowing that if he had the opportunity, he would make a good showing for his efforts. As an example, his plane was 100 miles per hour slower than the plane whose record he wanted to challenge. His idea was that he would be the first African American to attempt to fly around the world. Two other African Americans had already announced their intentions to be the first to accomplish this feat, Thomas Cox Allen and Hubert Fautleroy Julian; however, the two never made any such flights.

Jones continued to jump until well into the forties and it is reported that at some point he worked in a poultry house. The last known press coverage he had that makes reference to him was when he appeared in a photograph taken in Chicago at a celebration ceremony honoring Cornelius R. Coffey, a black aviation pioneer in the Chicago area who for many years ran an airplane maintenance school.

