



William Powell: African American Aviation Visionary

William Powell was a World War I veteran who had the opportunity to see Aviation in action during his tour of duty in France during World War I. His experience with the sight and sound of airplanes in combat sparked a desire in him to become an aviator. When he returned to the United States from his tour of service in France, he became involved in aviation. Powell was highly educated with a degree in Electrical Engineering, having obtained his degree after his return from the war with a strong desire to fly... he experienced the same obstacles that all African American's who wanted to learn to fly before him had experienced ... he had extreme difficulty finding someone willing to teach him to fly.

Born in Henderson, Kentucky, Powell served in the United States Army during World War I as an Army officer. When World War I began, Powell was a student in University training to become an Electrical Engineer. African Americans were eager to join the War efforts and fight for their country. They fought to make their desires a reality and were championed by such notable individuals as Dr. Joel E. Spingarn who lobbied on behalf of African Americans getting training as Army officers. The President at that time was Woodrow Wilson, a southerner who was opposed to arming African Americans even in defense of their country. Fortunately, the persistence of voices from many directions in the African Community was heard and the government decided to begin training for African American Officers. Fort Des Moines, Iowa was selected as the training site. A list of 1,250 African American officers came to Des Moines for training to receive their officer's commission. In addition to the African American officers, 350,000 enlisted African Americans served in segregated units performing mostly support duties. Several units did see action and those that did gave a good account of their actions. Henry Johnson is an example of the action from many African American soldiers who served with the 369 Regiment, a segregated unit that saw action in France. Henry Johnson was assigned to company C, 369 Regiment of the 93 Division. Private Johnson, while on guard duty, was attacked by a group of twenty Germans. He opened fire injuring three of the attackers and soon was reduced to hand-to-hand combat using his bolo knife. Having sustained three gunshot wounds, he continued to fight until he recovered a fellow soldier who was about to be captured. At this point, he had received over twenty wounds. For his efforts, he was awarded the French Croix de Guerre by France and from his own country, he received nothing. Powell also received an injury and returned to the United States to resume his civilian life and to complete his engineering degree. Powell had seen airplanes fly during the war in France and on a return trip to France, he managed to get his first ride. When he returned to the United States, he had developed an interest in flying.

He eventually became the owner of a successful automotive repair shop on the South side of Chicago. In 1928, he moved to Los Angeles and became extensively involved in aviation. He promoted aviation through his book entitled, Black Wings, the Bessie Colman Aero Club, and recruited prominent African Americans such as Duke Elliton, and the heavy weight boxing champion Joe Louis to support African American Aviation. Powell had a very strong belief in liberation from the so called "Jim Crow" laws and policies that denied all African Americans their basic civil rights. These hardships were forced by law and



customs on an entire race of people without regard for their humanity, dignity and civil rights. This author [Ben Henderson] remembers during his lifetime as an 18 year old serviceman traveling in military uniform and being forced to sit in the back of a bus, sit in segregated waiting rooms , forced to drink from segregated water fountains and forced to use segregated restrooms. As a service member, my family lived in East Texas and I was stationed in Columbus, Ohio. It was approximately 900 miles from my military base to my home town in East Texas. The city of Saint Louis was slightly more than 400 miles from Columbus, which worked out to become a good day's driving distance for a twenty-two year old male. When you cross the bridge in St. Louis over the Mississippi River, there were no facilities such as hotels and restaurants that would accommodate you; so you had no choice but to try and find a black neighborhood that would provide you accommodations. In small towns and cities in African American neighborhoods before the days of the civil rights movement, these things did not exist. I would keep on driving and go the entire 900 miles without stopping - only to purchase gas and take a nap so that I could keep my eyes open when I started driving again. Driving at night, I could stop on the side of the road for a brief rest and take the necessary toilet break when I needed to do so.

Powell recognized these challenges for the traveling African American and expressed his belief that he had the solution that would free African Americans from becoming a victim of "Jim Crow" laws while traveling in the United States and in particular, the South. Powell expressed this point of view when he said the following, "Negroes will never ride as free men and women below the Mason and Dixon line...until they ride in airplanes owned and operated by Negroes." In the first promotional advertisement of his book, "Black Wings," Powell urged African Americans to read his book and consider the possibilities of there being one million jobs that African Americans could control if they set their minds to it and pooled their resources. The first requirement was for them to get his book and read it. In the book, Powell speaks of the possibilities of African Americans becoming able to control their own destiny in the aviation industry. He believed that there were possibilities of creating a million jobs for themselves through community efforts and cooperation. He attempted to communicate to the African American community that the aviation world belongs to anyone willing to make the necessary investments in order to succeed. In his mind, Powell knew that African Americans were as good as any other group of flyers. There was a list of successful flyers that he could recall, which included his own name. The list would start out with Eugene Bullard, Bessie Coleman, Hubert Julian, James Herman Banning and many other pilots on the West Coast and in the Chicago area who were also accomplished pilots in the 1920s and 1930s.

Powell envisioned that African American pilots could start businesses such as fire fighters, flying fish from Mexico, hauling freight, and crop dusting. He envisioned African Americans as mechanics, airplane designers, engineers, test pilots and any other skill that was required to make their venture in the field of aviation a success. Powell was dedicated to the idea that there had to be strong leadership in the African community to keep his idea alive. He was offered several positions that would have perhaps become quite beneficial to him; however, he opted to continue to voice the need for community action in getting a grip on the opportunities that aviation offered before its time had run out. Powell worked



tirelessly during the twenties and thirties to bring his dream to fruition....that African Americans would change their station in life with a new fortune gained from their participation in aviation. He died in 1942 having not realized the fulfillment of his dream that African Americans could take advantage of the opportunities that aviation could offer them if they would collectively combine their efforts.



Below is a list of aviators who were accomplished flyers during Powell's life. These Pilots were registered with the us department of commerce:

C. Alfred Anderson	{Transport Licenses No. 7638}	Bryn Mawr, PA
John W. Green	{Limited Commercial Licenses No. 15897}	Boston, MA
Janet Harmon Waterford	{Industrial Licenses No. 7934}	Chicago, IL
James H. Banning	{Private Licenses No. 1324}	Los Angeles, CA
Leon Parrish	{Private Licenses NO. 16069}	New York, NY
Hubert Julian	{Private Licenses No. 21512}	New York, NY
Lincoln Payne	{Private Licenses No. 23575}	Philadelphia, PA



William J. Powell	{Private Licenses No. 24335} {Navigator Licenses} {Aeronautical engineer}	Los Angeles, CA
James Hoard	{Private Licenses No. 26035}	San Francisco, CA
John C. Robinson	{Private Licenses No. 26042}	Chicago, IL
Cecil O'Neal	{Private Licenses No. 27179}	New York, NY
Pickens Black	{Private Licenses No. 27677}	Jackson County, AR
Dr. Albert Forsythe	{Private Licenses No. 27287}	Atlantic City, NJ
Dr. C. C. "Jack" Peritt	{Licensed Mechanic}	New York, NY
John W. Green	{Licensed Mechanic No. 10658}	Boston, MA
Cornelius Coffey	{Licensed Mechanic 11598}	Chicago, IL
Ed Smith	{Licensed Parachute Rigger}	Cincinnati, OH
Jay Howard Montgomery	{Aeronautical Engineer}	Los Angeles, CA
Irvin E. Wells	{Aeronautical engineer}	Los Angeles, CA